



Rescued By My Small Town Billionaire

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: An unexpected fire and rescue has made this protective, fireman my fake boyfriend.

My flower shop is rebuilt from the fire as we are forced together. He's my best friend's brother. Pretending to be a couple with Mike, keeps me safe from my Ex.

Real feelings blossom. With help from my friends, I explore falling deeply for this strong and supportive man.

This small town, fake dating romance between a protective, billionaire fireman and a sweet and sunny florist is sure to please.

This is a STANDALONE, Clean and Wholesome romance that can be read separately in the series. All the chemistry, none of the steam.

Total Pages (Source): 37

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Chapter one

Becky

The smell of smoke wakes me.

At first, it's faint, teasing the edge of my senses like a cruel trick from a bad dream. My eyes flutter open, groggy from too little sleep and the lingering fog of grief. Then it hits me all at once—the sharp, acrid scent of something burning.

This is no dream.

I bolt upright in bed, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it might crack my ribs. My apartment above the shop is eerily silent, except for the distant sound of glass shattering. I scramble for my robe, my mind racing. What if it's nothing? What if something is very wrong?

Running to the window, I fling it open. A rush of cool early-morning air slaps my face, but it does nothing to calm the fire raging below. Flames lick at the edges of the shop's side door, their bright orange glow slicing through the predawn shadows.

My floral shop—my dream—is on fire.

I don't remember moving, but suddenly I'm pounding down the stairs, barefoot and trembling, trying not to trip as panic propels me forward. Smoke stings my eyes as I grab the phone from the counter and dial 911, my fingers shaking so hard I can barely hit the buttons. My voice cracks as I speak, barely audible over the roar of my pulse.

“My shop,” I gasp. “Beckon Blooms on Main Street. It’s on fire! Please hurry.”

The operator’s calm voice should reassure me, but it doesn’t. I’m rooted to the spot, unable to do anything but clutch the phone like a lifeline. My hands ache to save the shop, to douse the flames and protect the bouquets waiting for pickup, the arrangements meant to bring joy to brides and comfort to the grieving.

But I know better.

Fire isn’t something you fight alone with your bare hands.

The wail of a fire truck splits the stillness, cutting through my terror. It grows louder by the second until red and white lights bathe the walls in a kaleidoscope of urgency.

Relief floods through me when the truck screeches to a halt and firefighters jump out, their movements swift and purposeful.

One of them turns toward me, his face obscured by the helmet and mask, but his presence is commanding. His voice booms over the crackle of the fire as he shouts orders to the others.

He doesn’t look at me—doesn’t have to. His focus is on the fire, but his confidence in handling it offers a sliver of hope.

Stepping back, I hug myself as the firefighters charge toward the building.

The roar of water from the hose competes with the roar of the flames, and for a moment, I can’t tell who’s winning. My legs shake, and I lean against the doorframe, watching helplessly. The shop feels like an extension of myself, and it’s burning.

“Miss, are you okay?”

The strong masculine voice startles me. I glance up to see one of the firefighters, his mask off now. His brown eyes are sharp and assessing as they lock onto mine. He's tall, broad-shouldered, and so effortlessly commanding it takes me a second to answer.

"I... I think so," I manage, though the words feel like a lie.

"Stay back," he says firmly, his gaze softening as he notices my trembling hands. "We've got this."

I want to believe him.

The fire is under control within minutes, though it feels like hours. Smoke still curls from the edges of the shop, leaving an acrid haze in the air.

I'm clutching my elbows, watching the last remnants of the blaze die out, when the same firefighter approaches me again.

This time, he pulls off his helmet, revealing a face that's both rugged and striking, with a strong jawline and eyes that seem to hold the weight of the world.

"Rebecca, right?" he asks, and my heart stumbles.

"Yes," I reply warily. My name must be on the 911 report. "Well, Becky."

"How bad is it?" I ask in a tiny whisper.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

He glances toward the shop, then back at me, his expression grave. “The fire didn’t spread to the apartment upstairs, but there’s smoke damage. The shop will need repairs. It’s not safe for you to stay here.”

I close my eyes, fighting tears. As if this week couldn’t get worse. First Aunt Betty’s funeral, and now this? My throat tightens, but I force myself to nod.

“Thank you,” I manage, though the words feel woefully inadequate.

The morning sun is rising when Maggie Ann shows up, her face pale with worry.

“Oh, Becky,” she breathes, wrapping me in a hug that smells faintly of cinnamon and vanilla. “Josie and I were just getting into work when we heard. I am so sorry.”

“Thank you,” I whisper against her shoulder, trying not to cry.

Ellie and Lulu arrive minutes later. They form a protective circle around me, their concern pouring out in a torrent of questions and reassurances.

“We’ll figure this out,” Lulu says firmly, her hand warm on my arm. “For now, you’re staying with me. No arguments.”

“Lulu, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Becky,” she interrupts, her tone brooking no argument. “You’re staying with me. My place has plenty of room, and you know I’d never forgive myself if I let you go through this alone.”

Her words dissolve the last of my resistance. I nod, too exhausted to argue.

As the firefighters wrap up, I glance around at the soot-covered remnants of my dream. I don't know how long I stand there, lost in a haze of disbelief, until a thought jolts me upright.

“B!”

Everyone turns toward me, startled by my sudden outburst.

“My kitten,” I explain, panic tightening my voice. “I can't find her.”

Lulu frowns. “Was she inside?”

“I don't know. She likes to hide in the shop sometimes, and I—” My voice breaks. The thought of losing B., especially after losing Aunt Betty, is too much. The weight of uncertainty crushes me.

I pace along the sidewalk, my eyes darting to every shadow, every pile of debris, desperate for a glimpse of soft gray fur. My friends hover close by, offering murmurs of encouragement, but their words barely register.

“B.!” I call out again, my voice raw. “Come on, sweetheart. Please.”

The name feels like a fragile link to Aunt Betty, who I lost so recently. That little kitten had been a gift of comfort, her playfulness and quiet purrs the only light in the haze of grief. The thought of losing her, too, feels unbearable.

“Hey, take a deep breath.”

The firefighter's voice pulls me back to the moment. He's standing in front of me, his

dark eyes steady, his tone calm but firm. He hands me a bottle of water. “Everything will be okay.” Then he walks back to the firetruck.

I want to believe him, but fear has taken root in my chest.

“Where would she go?” I ask my friends, my voice trembling.

“She could still be in the shop,” Maggie says, glancing back at the smoldering building. “Or she might’ve run somewhere close by.”

“Like the alley?” Ellie offers.

Before I can move, the firefighter steps in front of me, holding up a flashlight. “No, you’re not going in there. The structure isn’t safe yet. Let me look.”

I blink at him, startled. “But—”

His commanding tone leaves no room for argument. He disappears into the shadows of the alley, his broad shoulders a reassuring presence even as my anxiety twists tighter.

“She has to be somewhere,” I whisper.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“We’ll find her,” Lulu promises, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

But as I glance toward the ruins of my shop, the weight of uncertainty presses down harder.

“Where are you, B.?”

Chapter two

Mike

The smell of smoke still clings to my clothes as I stand near the fire truck, watching Becky huddle with her friends.

She’s shaking, her face pale beneath the smudges of soot. Her wide eyes flick toward the shop and back to the street like she’s searching for something—or someone.

I can’t stop looking at her.

There’s something about Becky.

Maybe it’s the way she tries to hold it together even when the weight of the world is pressing on her. Or maybe it’s her voice, soft and steady, even as she asked about the damage to her shop. Whatever it is, it’s got my attention—more than it should.

I’ve seen this kind of devastation before—fires tearing apart people’s lives—but tonight feels different. Personal. And I barely know her.

Before I can shake the thought, a man strolls up to her. Tall, wiry, with a confident stride that immediately sets me on edge. He's got that slick kind of charm I can spot a mile away, and I don't like the way his hand lingers on her arm. Becky stiffens, glancing toward me for a second, and something flashes across her face—relief? No, more like discomfort.

“Becky,” the man says, his voice oozing concern. “I just heard about the fire. Are you okay?”

Her answer is quiet, almost hesitant. “I’m fine, Paul.”

Paul. The name makes my jaw tighten. I’ve heard and seen enough to know he’s trouble.

“You sure?” he presses, stepping closer. “You look like you could use a break. Why don’t you let me help? I’ve got room at my place. You shouldn’t have to deal with this alone.”

“No,” Becky says quickly, her tone firm despite the tremble in her voice. “I’ve got it covered. Thanks, though.”

Paul’s smile tightens. “Come on, Becky. You don’t have to be so stubborn. I can help you. I want to help you.”

I can’t stand it anymore. I step closer, clearing my throat loud enough to draw their attention. Paul turns, his eyes narrowing slightly when he sees me. Becky looks up at me too, her expression unreadable.

“She said she’s got it covered,” I say evenly, my voice calm but firm.

Paul’s gaze flicks between us, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head.

He doesn't say anything, but the way he looks at Becky—like she's some kind of prize to be won—makes me want to plant myself between them. Eventually, he backs off, muttering something under his breath before walking away.

“You okay?” I ask Becky once he's out of earshot.

She nods, but her shoulders are still tense. “Thank you,” she murmurs, her voice so soft I almost miss it.

Before I can respond, her friends pull her back into their circle, and I let them.

She's safe with them. I need to head back to the station.

The firehouse is quiet when I get back, most of the crew wrapping up for the night.

The Junction Falls Firehouse is more than just a station—it's a cornerstone of the community, a place where bravery meets camaraderie and where the town's most dedicated gather, ready to protect and serve.

The station is located just a few blocks from the town square, close enough to respond quickly to emergencies but far enough from the bustle to allow for quiet moments of respite. A red-painted hydrant stands near the sidewalk, often serving as a meeting spot for kids who love to watch the fire trucks roll out on a call.

Stepping inside, the firehouse smells of leather, smoke, and fresh coffee—a mix of warmth and work. Past the garage, a set of double doors leads to the main living quarters, where we rest, eat, and wait for the next call.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

I grab a shower, and the hot water washes away some of the tension in my muscles. When I step out, Burt's already lounging on the couch, flipping through channels on the TV. He glances up when I walk in, his grizzled face breaking into a grin.

"Rough one?" he asks, nodding toward the soot-streaked jacket I'm shrugging off.

"Yeah," I reply, dropping onto the couch next to him. "Small shop fire. No injuries, but the owner's place is out of commission for a while."

Burt lets out a low whistle. "Tough break. That florist, okay?"

"Yep. Becky," I say, her name slipping out before I can stop it. I clear my throat, trying to sound casual.

"Ah," Burt says with a knowing smirk. "You looked like you were paying a little extra attention out there."

"Drop it," I mutter, grabbing the remote from him and changing the channel. Burt chuckles but doesn't push it.

We sit in companionable silence for a while, watching a rerun of some hockey game. It's mindless—exactly what I need after the chaos of the night. Burt starts rambling about his old college football days, and I half-listen, letting his voice wash over me as my mind drifts back to Becky.

It's well into the morning, when the firehouse door creaks open, and Mrs. Hargrove steps inside. She's an elderly woman who lives a few streets over, always doting on

the crew with homemade cookies and gossip about the town. But today, she's carrying a small crate in her hands, her face lined with concern.

"Mike, Burt," she says, her voice soft. "I found this little one in my yard. Thought it might belong to someone."

She sets the crate on the counter, and I peer inside to find a tiny gray kitten, its big green eyes blinking up at me. It's trembling, huddled in the corner like it's trying to make itself invisible.

"She was scared half to death," Mrs. Hargrove continues. "I figured you boys might know what to do."

The kitten lets out a tiny mewl, and something in my chest tightens. Without thinking, I reach in and scoop her up. She's light as a feather, all bones and fluff, and she immediately curls into the crook of my arm, her tiny claws gripping my shirt.

"Well, looks like she's claimed you," Burt says with a laugh.

I glance down at the kitten, her little body warm against mine, and feel an unexpected wave of protectiveness. "Guess I've got a roommate," I say, the corner of my mouth twitching into a smile.

By the time I get home, the sky is streaked with pink and gold, the promise of a new day chasing away the last traces of darkness. The house is quiet, everyone still asleep. I enter quietly, the kitten cradled in my arms, and head straight to my room.

Exhaustion pulls at me as I drop onto the bed, the events of the night catching up all at once. The kitten climbs onto my chest, her tiny paws kneading against my shirt

before curling into a ball. I reach up to scratch behind her ears, her soft purr lulling me toward sleep.

As my eyes drift closed, one thought lingers in my mind: Becky. Her voice, her face, the way she looked at me when I told her everything would be okay. Something about her is pulling me in, and I'm not sure I want to fight it.

The kitten stirs as I shift under the covers, her tiny body stretching out before settling back against my chest. Her soft purring hums in the quiet room, a sound so soothing it starts to unwind the tension in my shoulders. For a moment, I just lie there, staring up at the dark ceiling, letting the stillness settle over me.

Becky deserves better. And maybe, just maybe, I'm starting to wonder if I could be part of "better."

Chapter three

Becky

Waking up to the sound of birds chirping outside the window, I inhale a soft breeze carrying the scent of freshly cut grass. It's so peaceful, so normal, that for a second, I forget everything that's happened. But then it all comes rushing back—the fire, losing B., and the overwhelming uncertainty of what comes next.

I push the covers aside and stretch, feeling the stiffness in my back from a night spent tossing and turning. The unfamiliar room, cozy as it is, feels foreign. Still, Lulu's generosity gives me a thread of comfort I can cling to.

After a quick shower, I grab the mismatched clothes my friends pulled together for me. Ellie's top is too tight across the chest, and Maggie Ann's pants are a little too long, making me feel like a kid playing dress-up. I roll the cuffs and tug at the fabric

until it looks halfway presentable, but the whole ensemble is a disaster.

I glance in the mirror and laugh under my breath. “Well, quirky is better than nothing,” I mutter, running a brush through my damp hair.

The smell of fresh-ground coffee greets me as I step into the kitchen, instantly lifting my spirits. Lulu is already at the table, sipping from a hand-thrown mug and scrolling through her phone. She looks up when she hears me and grins.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” she teases, taking in my mismatched outfit.

“Don’t start,” I warn, grabbing a mug and pouring myself some coffee. “This is what happens when you rely on friends with completely different wardrobes.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“It’s cute,” Lulu says, biting back a laugh. “In a... mismatched, free-spirited kind of way.”

I roll my eyes but can’t help smiling as I take a seat across from her.

Light streams through the kitchen window, highlighting the backyard beyond. My breath catches as I take it in—rows of vibrant flowers in every color imaginable, interspersed with lush greenery and trailing vines. It’s a garden straight out of a fairytale.

“Your backyard is gorgeous,” I say, nodding toward the window.

Just outside the kitchen, raised stone garden beds overflow with lavender, rosemary, sage, and chamomile. Climbing roses and honeysuckle wind around a weathered wooden trellis, creating a secluded nook with a small wrought-iron table and chairs.

Lulu glances outside and shrugs. “Thanks. That’s Mom’s doing. She’s a master gardener—always has been. She’ll probably be out there pruning or planting as soon as she gets back from her morning walk.”

“It’s incredible,” I murmur, my mind drifting to my own love of flowers. I could spend hours out there, losing myself in the rhythm of planting and tending. The wind chimes hanging from a nearby pear tree tinkle softly, blending with the sounds of birds chirping and bees buzzing from bloom to bloom.

“Speaking of incredible,” Lulu says, leaning forward with a mischievous glint in her eye. “What’s this I hear about Paul showing up at the fire last night?”

My stomach twists, and I sigh. “He offered me a place to stay. I told him no.”

“Um... yeah,” Lulu says firmly. “That guy’s bad news. You’re too vulnerable now to ride that dramatic roller coaster again.”

“Tell me about it,” I mutter, taking a sip of coffee.

Lulu studies me for a moment, her brow furrowed in thought. “You know,” she says slowly, “there’s a way to make him back off for good.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh? And what’s that?”

She grins. “You could pretend to be dating someone else. Someone who makes Paul think twice about sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong.”

I blink at her, caught off guard. “Lulu, that’s... I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Paul has some volatile qualities.

“Why not?” she presses. “It could work. He’d have no reason to bother you if he thought you’d moved on.”

“Moved on with who?” I ask, crossing my arms.

Her grin widens, and my stomach sinks. “My brother, Michael,” she says simply.

My coffee nearly goes down the wrong pipe. “Michael?” I remember her having a brother when she was last in town, but that was years ago. He had been older than us and never seemed to notice his younger sister and her friends.

“Why not?” Lulu shrugs. “He’s perfect for the role—strong, intimidating, and completely uninterested in drama. Paul would steer clear for sure.”

I shake my head, laughing nervously. “Lulu, from what I remember, your brother is... intense. No one would believe we’d be a couple.”

She waves me off. “That’s just his outside. He’s actually a big softie under all that gruffness.”

“I don’t know,” I say hesitantly, my mind racing. The idea of fake dating anyone is ridiculous... but also tempting to have a buffer between me and Paul.

Before I can say anything else, a small meow interrupts us. I freeze, my heart skipping a beat.

“B.?” I whisper, my eyes darting toward the doorway.

A tiny kitten pads into the kitchen, her tail flicking behind her. She stops in the middle of the room, tilting her head as if to say, What’s all the fuss about?

“B.!” I exclaim, dropping to my knees. The kitten darts toward me, climbing into my lap as I scoop her up. Tears sting my eyes as I press my cheek against her soft fur. “Oh my goodness.”

Lulu looks just as stunned as I feel. “Wait, that’s your kitten?”

“Yes,” I say, laughing through my tears. “Where did you find her?”

“I didn’t,” Lulu says slowly.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Before I can process what that means, the kitchen door swings open, and a deep voice fills the room.

“Where’d you run off to—”

I look up, and my breath catches. He stands in the doorway, his tall frame silhouetted against the morning light. He’s dressed casually, but the crisp shirt and well-fitted jeans scream wealth and confidence in a way that makes my head spin.

For a moment, we just stare at each other, equally stunned.

“You,” I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

His brow furrows, his gaze flicking between me and the kitten. “Becky?”

The realization hits us at the same time. The gruff firefighter from last night is the same man standing in front of me now—Lulu’s brother, the wealthy rancher I’ve heard so much about.

Mike’s eyes narrow slightly, and for a moment, the room feels charged with an energy I can’t quite place. He steps forward, his gaze fixed on me as though trying to piece together how I’ve ended up sitting at his kitchen table, clutching his kitten.

“Wait a second,” he says slowly, his deep voice rumbling. “You’re the florist?”

“And you’re...” I trail off, motioning toward him. “You’re Lulu’s older brother?”

His jaw tightens, and he crosses his arms, his broad shoulders making the kitchen feel smaller. “Yeah. And you’re Becky, one of Lulu’s little friends.”

“Um... okay.” I nod, still holding B. close to my chest. The kitten purrs softly, oblivious to the tension swirling in the air.

“You’re the one who brought B. here?” I ask, my voice barely steady.

Mike nods, his expression softening just a fraction. “Found her at the firehouse. Mrs. Hargrove dropped her off, said she found her wandering in her yard.”

Lulu grins. “Well, this is convenient. You two are already getting along. Makes my idea even better.”

“What idea?” Mike asks warily.

Lulu beams. “I told Becky you should pretend to be her boyfriend to keep her ex from bothering her.”

Mike blinks, his expression unreadable.

But the way his eyes linger on me for a beat too long tells me the idea has already taken root.

“Absolutely not,” we both say in unison.

Chapter four

Mike

The ranch hands are already hard at work, and the familiar sounds of hooves on dirt

and the steady hum of machinery settle something inside me.

The smell of freshly cut hay hangs in the crisp morning air as I head out to the stables.

It's a testament to the hard work and care we've put into it. This land, this routine—it's my anchor.

The Thorn stables are as impressive as they are practical, built with sturdy timber and a high-pitched roof to allow for natural ventilation. Massive wooden sliding doors stand open during the day, letting in fresh air and sunlight. It's a place that feels alive, where every sound—the soft neighs of the horses, the creak of saddle leather, the rhythmic clatter of hooves on dirt—tells a story of dedication and respect for the animals.

For me, the Thorn Ranch isn't just land—it's legacy, responsibility, and home.

"Morning, boss," Pete, the ranch manager, greets me as I approach. He's leaning against the fence, clipboard in hand, his cowboy hat tilted to block the early sunlight.

"Morning," I reply, scanning the expansive pasture. The cattle look good, grazing lazily under the watchful eyes of our new herding dog. "How's it looking today?"

Beyond the stables, the ranch opens into rolling fields, where grassy meadows are dotted with wildflowers in the spring. A small creek winds through the back of the property, its crystal-clear waters providing a perfect place for horses to cool off in the summer.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“Smooth so far,” Pete says, checking off something on his clipboard. “Fences are holding up after last week’s storm, and the water troughs are all clean. We’re ahead of schedule on the feed delivery.”

I nod, satisfied. “Good. Let’s keep it that way.”

We go over a few more details about the herd’s rotation and an upcoming auction before I hand off some paperwork and head back toward the house. Ranch work has always been second nature to me, a steady rhythm that keeps my mind focused. But today, no matter how much I try, my thoughts keep drifting to Becky.

She’s in the house with Lulu now, probably keeping an eye on that tiny kitten of hers. B. has a knack for finding trouble—just like her owner, it seems.

By the time I get back, the smell of coffee wafts through the open kitchen window. I step inside to find Lulu sitting at the table with Becky, both of them bent over a pile of papers. Becky’s face lights up when she sees me, a shy but warm smile that catches me off guard.

“Good news,” she says, holding up her phone. “The insurance agent thinks the fire damage is manageable. They’re sending someone out to assess it, but the policy covers most of the repairs.”

“That’s a relief,” I say, leaning against the counter.

Lulu grins. “See? Things are already looking up.”

Becky nods, but her smile falters slightly as her gaze drifts toward the window. Following her line of sight, I spot the kitten bounding through the backyard, her tiny paws kicking up bits of dirt as she explores the garden.

“B.!” Becky calls, her tone laced with worry. She hurries to the back door and steps outside, her eyes scanning the garden.

“It’s fenced in,” I say, joining her on the porch. “She’s not going anywhere.”

“I know,” Becky replies, her voice soft. “But she’s so small. I just... I don’t want to lose her again.”

Her concern tugs at something deep inside me. I watch as she crouches down, calling the kitten’s name in a gentle, singsong voice. B. stops sniffing a patch of wildflowers and darts back toward her, leaping into her arms like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Becky cradles the kitten against her chest, her expression a mix of relief and love. It’s a simple moment, but something about it stays with me.

Later, Lulu corners me in the kitchen while Becky is upstairs getting ready.

“Mike, I need you to take Becky to the florist shop,” she says, her tone brooking no argument. “I need a ride back to the bookstore too.”

“To do what?” I ask, suspicious of her tone.

“She needs to meet with the insurance agent and make plans for the repairs,” Lulu explains, handing me a set of keys. “You’re better at dealing with logistics than I am, and besides...” She pauses, smirking. “It’s a good opportunity to put your fake boyfriend act to work.”

I groan, running a hand through my hair. “Lulu—”

“Don’t Lulu me,” she interrupts. “You agreed to this. Now go.”

Before I can argue, Becky appears at the top of the stairs, looking hesitant but determined. Her mismatched outfit from earlier is gone, replaced by a simple floral dress that somehow makes her look even more like she belongs in a fairytale.

“Ready?” I ask, trying to ignore the way my chest tightens when she smiles.

“Ready,” she says softly.

After dropping Lulu off at the bookstore, Becky and I head to the florist shop. The damage is worse than I remember—blackened beams, charred counters, and the faint smell of smoke still clinging to the air. Becky stands in the doorway, her eyes scanning the destruction with a mix of sadness and resolve.

“It looks bad,” she murmurs, hugging herself.

“It’s fixable,” I say, my voice firm. “The insurance will take care of it, and the repairs won’t take as long as you think.”

Becky glances at me, her eyes filled with gratitude. “Thank you for saying so. I trust your experience.”

I nod, not trusting myself to say anything else.

She smiles.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“Let’s get away from here,” I offer. “How about a walk?”

Becky slips her hand into mine, and the world seems to pause. Her touch is light, tentative, but it sends a jolt of electricity straight through me.

“Fake boyfriend,” she whispers, her cheeks turning pink.

I squeeze her hand gently, grounding myself in the warmth of her palm. “Got it,” I say, though I’m not sure who I’m reassuring—her or me.

The town is alive with quiet energy, the kind that lingers when people don’t want the night to end. Becky and I walk side by side, the cobblestone streets lit by soft golden lanterns overhead. Shadows stretch across the sidewalks, and the low hum of conversation drifts from diners at the outdoor café tables.

As we pass the town’s antique shop, Becky stops, her gaze catching on something inside.

“What is it?” I ask.

She bites her lip, hesitating before pointing. “That. The little music box in the corner.”

I follow her gaze and spot it—a small wooden box, carved with tiny roses along the edges, the brass key slightly tilted as if it’s been wound a thousand times before.

Before she can protest, I push open the shop door. “Come on,” I say, grinning. “You

can't just stare at it all night.”

With a playful huff, Becky steps inside.

The inside of the shop smells like aged wood and nostalgia. She picks up the music box, carefully turning the key.

“Edelweiss,” she whispers, eyes lighting up in wonder.

I smirk. “Guess it was meant to be.”

She looks up at me, smiling and laughing. And in that moment, I realize—

I could listen to that sound for the rest of my life.

Chapter five

Becky

The sound of murmured voices and soft laughter fills the town square as I walk past the bakery, holding B. snug in her little carrier.

The kitten's been my constant companion these days, a bundle of comfort and calm in a world that feels like it's teetering on the edge of chaos.

But the murmurs around me are different today. Instead of the usual chatter about the weather and bake sales, I catch fragments of something else.

“...did you see them at the square yesterday?”

“...holding hands. Looked awfully cozy.”

“Never thought Mike would settle down. Especially not with a florist.”

The words make my cheeks burn, and I duck my head, hoping no one notices. Gossip travels faster than wildfire in a town like this, and apparently, my ‘relationship’ with Mike has become the hottest topic.

I can’t even be mad—it’s not like we didn’t know this would happen. But the weight of the attention is heavier than I expected.

By the time I reach Ellie’s matchmaking service, I’m still replaying the whispers in my head. Ellie greets me at the door with her usual sunny smile, her hair pulled back into a neat fishtail braid. Maggie Ann has stopped by to chat as well.

“Becky!” Ellie says, ushering me inside. “You look adorable, as always.”

“Thanks,” I mumble, setting B.’s carrier down near the desk.

Ellie tilts her head, studying me. “What’s wrong? You look... flustered.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Sinking into one of her cozy chairs, I sigh. “It’s nothing. Just the town being the town. Everyone’s talking about me and Mike.”

Ellie’s eyes light up. “That’s good! It means the plan is working.”

“Yeah,” I say, fiddling with my fingers. “It’s just... weird. I’m not used to being the center of attention.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better,” Ellie says with a wink, “you and Mike are officially the cutest fake couple this town has ever seen.”

I laugh despite myself, shaking my head. “Thanks, Ellie. That helps.”

I tell the girls that I finally met Mike and Lulu’s mother, Julia Thorn. She’s a tall, elegant woman with kind eyes and a voice that instantly put me at ease.

“She hugged me tight,” I say, happily remembering the open way Julia had accepted me into their home and their lives. “She’s a gardener, and we had so much to talk about.”

“We had a lively discussion about flowers, gardening, and recipes, and by the end of our chat, it felt like I’d known Julia for years,” I add. “On her advice, I’ve decided to start a new venture. Who’s in?”

“What is it?” Ellie asks curiously.

“I’m going to teach ‘language of flowers’ classes. The idea came to me while

chatting with Julia,” I say excitedly. “My aunt taught me so much, and I’d like to share it with others.”

“Share already!” Ellie interjects.

“Flowers have been used for centuries to communicate emotions,” I explain. “Back in Victorian times, people couldn’t always say what they meant out loud, so they used flowers instead. Each bloom had a meaning, and if you knew the language, you could send entire messages without saying a word.”

“Like a secret love letter in a bouquet?” Ellie murmurs, intrigued.

“Exactly,” I say, my excitement growing. “A bouquet wasn’t just about looking pretty—it was a coded message. The right combination could confess love, express regret, or even reject a suitor without a single spoken word.”

“Most people know this one—red roses mean love and passion.”

Maggie Ann sighs dramatically. “A classic.”

“But if someone gave you a yellow rose in the Victorian era, it didn’t mean love—it meant friendship, or worse, jealousy,” I explain, enjoying sharing my knowledge with a willing audience.

Maggie Ann nudges Ellie playfully. “Better make sure none of your matchmaking couples send yellow roses to the wrong people.”

Ellie laughs. “Noted.”

I smile. “Daisies represent innocence and new beginnings.”

Playful banter fills the air, and I feel an overwhelming sense of joy. I knew both Ellie and Maggie Ann would jump on board.

I proceed to tell them about Julia's herb garden in the backyard and explain my plans for the classes. It will give me something to do while I wait for the shop to be rebuilt. Luckily, the insurance will pay for a rental, and since I'll be staying with Lulu, I won't need money for expenses.

"It's perfect," Maggie Ann says when I mention it later that day. "People love learning something new, and it's for a good cause. We'll raise enough money to get your shop back on its feet in no time."

"Maggie Ann, Julia told me that she bakes a lot with the herbs in their garden. I just loved that," I share.

"Interesting," Maggie Ann muses. I can see the gears turning in her mind as she thinks about her next batch of savory bakes.

"Yum," Ellie remarks.

We decide the first class will include a small but enthusiastic group of women from town eager to learn the meanings behind their favorite blooms. I will teach them how to create arrangements that tell a story—roses for love, daisies for innocence, sunflowers for loyalty.

By the end of the brainstorming session, the room is filled with laughter. It's the first time in weeks that I feel truly hopeful.

This is what I love most—sharing the meaning of flowers, watching people discover how they can tell a story with just a handful of blooms.

And as I catch Mike's profile approaching through the shop window, I wonder...

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Could flowers be speaking for us too?

Mike takes me to the florist shop to check on the progress of the reconstruction. The insurance agent's initial assessment had been encouraging—most of the damage is superficial, and the structure is sound. But the repairs will still take time, which means I'll be staying at Lulu and Mike's house for the foreseeable future.

"Looks like it'll be about eight weeks at most," Mike says, gesturing to the freshly sanded walls and newly installed beams. "They're moving fast."

"That's a relief," I say, running my fingers over the counter where I used to arrange bouquets. "It feels strange seeing it like this, but I can already picture it coming back to life."

"You'll get there," Mike says, his voice steady.

Glancing at him, I see his expression is unreadable but warm. There's something in his tone that makes my chest feel lighter, like maybe I really believe everything is going to be okay.

That evening, as I'm arranging a flower vase in the kitchen of Thorn Ranch, my phone buzzes on the counter. Expecting a message from Ellie or Maggie Ann, my stomach drops when I see the name on the screen.

Paul.

I hesitate, my thumb hovering over the screen before finally opening the message.

We need to talk. Don't think I'm going to let this go. You can't hide behind Mike forever.

My breath catches, and I clutch the phone tightly, my heart pounding in my chest.

My hands shake as I reread Paul's message, the words blurring together. The knot in my stomach tightens, and for a moment, I feel like I can't breathe.

Mike's voice startles me. "Becky?"

I whirl around. He's standing in the doorway, his sharp eyes catching the tension I can't hide.

"Everything okay?"

I glance at my phone as another notification flashes across the screen.

Mike follows my gaze, his jaw tightening. "Is it him?"

I nod. "It's Paul. He sent me a message."

Mike's expression darkens. He picks up the phone, his face hardening. When he looks back at me, fire blazes in his eyes.

"You're not dealing with this alone," he says firmly.

For the first time since reading Paul's message, I feel a flicker of safety standing in Mike's presence.

“I’ll handle it,” Mike says, his voice resolute. “I promise.”

Chapter six

Mike

I spot Paul the moment I turn the corner into the town square.

He’s standing too close to Becky, his body angled toward her in a way that immediately puts me on edge. Her arms are crossed defensively, her expression tight, but she’s holding her ground. That alone tells me she’s stronger than she realizes.

Still, the sight of him hovering near her sends a protective fire through me. Without thinking, I stride toward them, closing the distance in seconds.

“Paul,” I say evenly, my voice low but firm. “Didn’t we already have this conversation?”

He turns, his eyes narrowing as they land on me. “Mike,” he says, his tone dripping with disdain. “This doesn’t concern you.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“Actually, it does,” I reply, stepping between him and Becky. Her small hand brushes against my arm as I move, and it’s enough to make me stand a little taller. “You’ve had your say. Now, leave her alone.”

Paul scoffs, his gaze flicking between us. “This is cute,” he sneers. “You’re playing knight in shining armor. But we both know Becky doesn’t need you to fight her battles.”

“Maybe not,” I admit, my jaw tightening. “But she doesn’t have to deal with you either. So, unless you want me to call the sheriff, I suggest you back off.”

Paul’s jaw works as he glares at me, but after a tense moment, he takes a step back. “This isn’t over,” he mutters before stalking off, his shoulders stiff with frustration.

The tension in my chest eases as I turn back to Becky. She’s staring at the ground, her cheeks flushed, but when she looks up, there’s a flicker of gratitude in her eyes.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly, keeping my voice steady. “What was that all about?”

Becky nods, but her shoulders sag as she exhales. “I’m fine. Thank you for stepping in.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” I say, offering her a small smile.

She explains that she just ran into him and was taken by surprise. Her lips curve upward slightly, and the sight makes my chest tighten in a way I don’t fully understand.

After dinner, Becky and I find ourselves sitting on the porch swing at the ranch, the quiet hum of crickets filling the space between us. She's cradling B., her fingers absentmindedly stroking the kitten's soft fur as she speaks.

"This fake relationship," she starts, her voice hesitant, "it has to look real. If it doesn't, Paul will never believe it."

Leaning back against the swing's frame, I nod. "I agree. But it's not just about looking real—it has to feel real. At least to the people watching."

She glances at me, her brows knitting together. "How do we do that?"

"Boundaries," I say simply. "We set clear boundaries. What we're comfortable with, what we're not. And we stick to them."

Becky's lips press into a thoughtful line before she nods. "Okay. That makes sense."

As we talk, the tension between us shifts, growing heavier but not uncomfortable. It's a strange mix of honesty and uncertainty, like we're balancing on the edge of something neither of us is ready to name.

The next morning, Becky joins me for a walk through the community gardens of the botanical gardens. My mom has invited me to bring Becky to tea at the Botanical garden gazebo. Becky offered to help out in the gardens. She lights up as we pass rows of blooming flowers, her excitement bubbling over as she stops to admire each one.

When we reach a bench near the center of the garden, Becky pauses, her gaze catching on the plaque attached to it. She leans closer to read the inscription, her

expression softening as the words sink in.

“For Julia Thorn, who taught us to find beauty in every bloom. With love, Mike and Lulu.”

“This is beautiful,” she murmurs, turning to me. “You did this for your mom?”

A lump forms in my throat. “She loves this place. She always says it feels like a little piece of heaven on earth.” I didn't tell Becky that I had given a sizable donation to the gardens and they gave the bench as a thank you.

Becky's smile is warm, her eyes shining with something I can't quite place. “She must be so proud of you. Of both of you.”

Her words hit me harder than I expected. Clearing my throat, I shrug it off. “Thanks.” My mother had a close call with her health a few years ago. Feeling we might lose her, made Lulu and I appreciate all that she's done for us.

It approaches afternoon as Becky and I wrap up our tour of the gardens.

“There was so much to see,” Becky says enthusiastically. “Those bonsai are so old and it must take a lot of patience.”

“Not for me I'm afraid. I don't have that kind of patience,” I joke. “I'm more of a quick action guy myself.”

“Don't sell yourself short,” she chides. “If it wasn't for your quick action, I might have gotten hurt in the fire.”

My heart feels tight. In retrospect, Becky's safety had meant more to me than just my job.

“It’s tea time at the gazebo,” I distract Becky. My mom is at the Master Gardener meeting and I was tasked to take Becky there for tea.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“Let’s go,” Becky beams. “I hope they have Jasmine tea.” I can’t help but smile at her excitement.

Beyond the gardens is a glass-walled conservatory, a blend of rustic elegance and timeless charm. Sunlight streams through the arched windows, illuminating rows of potted orchids, ferns, and tropical palms that line the perimeter. Inside, the air is warm, tinged with the scent of jasmine and citrus.

When we arrive at the designated space, my mom is in her element, leading Becky through the rows of carefully cultivated plants and explaining how each one is grown. Becky listens intently, her eyes wide with wonder as she takes it all in.

A small indoor tea room sits at the center of the conservatory, a cozy yet refined space where guests can enjoy fresh tea while gazing out at the lush greenery.

They’ve invited me to join them but really, I’d feel like quite out of place without Becky here. Becky glances over at me, giving me a soft, knowing smile. Something in my heart shifts.

The round wooden tables are covered with delicate lace runners, each set with antique porcelain teacups, silver spoons, and tiny vases filled with fresh-cut blooms from the garden.

“This is incredible,” she says, running her fingers gently over the petals of a vibrant orchid. “I’ve worked with flowers for years, but seeing them like this... it’s magical.”

My mom stirs her tea slowly, her gaze thoughtful. “This garden has been part of our

family tradition for years. It's where I used to bring Lulu and Mike when they were kids. And now, I get to share it with you."

My mom beams, clearly thrilled to have someone who shares her passion. "You're welcome here anytime, Becky. I'm happy you offered to volunteer at the butterfly garden."

"I'm happy to fill my time doing something useful," Becky says, her smile genuine. I am so happy that they have a lot in common.

A few hours later, I stop by to see my mom and pick up Becky. She's helping to plant the butterfly garden. I stop by to drop off some tools for my mom, but when I step into the indoor butterfly enclosure, the sight in front of me stops me in my tracks.

Becky is crouched near a patch of blooming milkweed, her hands gently cradling a tiny caterpillar. Her hair glows in the sunlight streaming through the glass ceiling, and her laughter rings out softly as a butterfly flutters past her.

For a moment, I can't move. She looks so at peace, so full of light, that it takes my breath away.

"Mike?" she says, looking up and catching me staring.

I clear my throat, stepping closer. "Just looking for my mom."

"She's over by the greenhouse," Becky says, standing and brushing her hands on her jeans.

We're close now, close enough that I can see the faint smudge of dirt on her cheek and the way her eyes sparkle in the sunlight. The air between us feels charged, and before I realize what's happening, I lean in slightly.

So does she.

The space between us disappears, and for a heartbeat, I think we're going to kiss. But then the sound of someone clearing their throat breaks the moment, and we both step back, flustered.

The sound of someone clearing their throat comes again, louder this time. Becky and I turn in unison to see my mom standing a few feet away, her arms crossed and an amused smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Mike," she says, her tone as light as the teasing glint in her eyes. "I didn't expect to find you here. Becky, you're doing a wonderful job with the butterfly garden."

Becky quickly steps back, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear as her cheeks flush. "Thank you, Mrs. Thorn," she says, her voice a little higher than usual.

"Mom," I mutter, rubbing the back of my neck, trying to recover from the moment.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," my mom says, though her smirk says otherwise. "But I could use some help in the greenhouse when you're done here, Mike."

"Sure," I say quickly, eager for an escape.

My mom nods and walks off, leaving me and Becky standing in awkward silence. She glances at me, her eyes wide with lingering tension, and for a moment, I consider saying something to break it.

But what would I say? That I almost kissed her? That for a second, I forgot this whole thing was fake?

Before I can sort through the jumble of thoughts in my head, Becky smiles nervously

and bends down to pick up her tools. “I should probably get back to work,” she says, avoiding my gaze.

“Yeah,” I say, taking a step back. “Let me know when you’re done here.”

As I walk away, my heart still racing, one thought keeps echoing in my mind: That wasn’t part of the plan.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

But for the life of me, I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Chapter seven

Becky

Julia, Mike's mom, pulls out her event planning binder in the spacious Thorn kitchen.

It's bursting with notes, sketches, and clipped-out ideas for the upcoming firefighter charity gala. She flips through it like a seasoned pro, pausing every so often to make a note on this year's to-do list.

My friends and I have gathered today to pitch in.

"Becky," she says, looking up at me with a warm smile, "would you mind helping with the flowers for the gala? We'll need arrangements for the tables, the entryway, and the stage. I can't think of anyone better to make it beautiful."

Her confidence in me warms my heart. "I'd love to," I say, trying to hide the lump forming in my throat. Working with flowers again feels like stepping back into myself after the fire, and the thought of contributing to something meaningful fills me with purpose.

"I'll bring cupcakes," Maggie Ann pipes up from her seat at the table. "And maybe a few trays of cookies. A gala isn't a gala without good food."

Ellie, who's perched on the counter, grins. "Between Becky's flowers and Maggie

Ann's baked goods, this gala might turn into a matchmaking event. Romance in the air, beautiful flowers, and sugar? It's a recipe for love."

Maggie Ann laughs. "You're always scheming, Ellie."

Julia steps out to get more planning supplies from her office.

"Not scheming, just... observing," Ellie replies, her eyes sparkling. "And I've observed a lot of sparks between a certain firefighter and our favorite florist."

Maggie Ann raises an eyebrow, and even Rachel and Josie, who've joined the planning meeting from the bakery, lean in. "Are you saying Mike and Becky...?" Rachel asks, leaving the question hanging.

Before Ellie can answer, Lulu walks into the kitchen, and the group abruptly quits talking. The sudden silence is so obvious that Lulu glances around, confused.

"What?" Lulu asks, setting her bag down. "Why does it feel like I just walked into a secret meeting?"

"No secret. Actually, it's no secret to anybody," Maggie Ann says quickly, though her grin gives her away. "Just planning the gala."

I let it go, too distracted by the detailed list of floral arrangements needed. The challenge excites me, and I can't wait to get started.

Over the rest of the day, I dive into the arrangements, losing myself in the familiar rhythm of trimming stems, selecting blooms, and piecing together designs. Mike checks in on me occasionally, his presence steady and reassuring.

"You're coming as my date, right?" he asks, leaning against the doorframe of the

room where I'm assembling a centerpiece.

"Your date?" I glance up, surprised.

"For the pretense," he clarifies, though there's a flicker of something in his expression I can't place. "It'll sell the story if we're seen together."

I nod, though the idea of walking into a gala on Mike's arm sends a nervous flutter through me. "Of course. For the pretense."

The night of the gala arrives faster than I expected.

The Junction Falls Event Hall, where the Fireman's Gala is being held, is a charming mix of elegance and small-town warmth. It's a historic brick building with large arched windows, its exterior framed with climbing ivy and twinkling fairy lights that cast a soft, romantic glow over the entrance. A red carpet runner leads up the steps, a playful nod to the formality of the night, though inside, the atmosphere is anything but stuffy.

When Mike meets me near the entrance, my breath catches. He's dressed in a tailored black suit that emphasizes his broad shoulders, and there's a hint of a smile on his lips as he looks at me.

"You look amazing," he says, his voice low.

"Thank you," I manage, my cheeks warming. The dress fits like a dream, the soft fabric flowing around me in a way that feels almost magical.

As we step through the grand wooden double doors, we're greeted by a breathtaking scene. The event hall has been transformed into a stunning display of twinkling lights and elegant table settings. The high vaulted ceilings are strung with delicate

chandeliers that sparkle like firelight.

I can't help but notice the way people glance at us, their smiles warm and approving. Mike keeps his hand lightly on my back, guiding me through the crowd, and I try not to think about how natural it feels.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Round tables draped in deep navy linens are accented with my floral centerpieces—bold red roses, golden lilies, and sprigsof eucalyptus, all arranged in elegant glass vases. Seeing them in place fills me with pride.

A spacious dance floor at the center of the hall, polished to a shine, is already filled with people swaying to the soft music playing from the live band in the corner.

The evening is a whirlwind of laughter, music, and conversations. Maggie Ann's desserts are a hit, and Ellie flits around the room, no doubt planting matchmaking seeds wherever she can. I find myself relaxing, the stress of the past few weeks momentarily fading as I enjoy the event.

I feel stunning in my soft dress that flows as I move.

But no matter where I go, I feel Mike's eyes on me. Every time I glance his way, he's watching me with an intensity that sends my heart racing. It's not just the pretense—it's something more, something real.

We circulate through the crowd, greeting familiar faces, and thanking guests for supporting the firefighter fundraiser. But soon enough, I find myself dragged to the dance floor by Lulu and Ellie, laughing as they twirl me around.

Mike watches from the sidelines, arms crossed, a smirk playing on his lips as he pretends he's above all the dancing nonsense.

That is until I march over and pull him in.

“Mike Thorn, if I have to be on this dance floor, so do you.”

He grumbles, but when I give him a pleading look, he sighs, muttering, “You’re impossible.”

Then he surprises me—pulling me in close, one arm firm around my waist, his other hand threading through mine as he expertly leads me into a slow, easy dance.

“Mike,” I whisper, eyes wide, “you can dance?”

He laughs, his breath warm against my ear. “Sweetheart, there’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

We move effortlessly, my heart pounding not from the dance but from the way he’s looking at me, like I’m the only thing in the entire room.

Laughter, music, and the soft glow of candlelight surround us, but all I can think about is how, for the first time in a long time, I feel completely and utterly safe.

Just as Mike is about to say something—something that makes my heart stutter in anticipation—his fellow firefighter Burt appears at his side, face set in something serious.

“There’s someone outside asking about Becky,” Burt says in a low voice.

The warmth of the moment vanishes instantly.

I stiffen in Mike’s arms, and when I look up at him, I see it in his expression—protectiveness, worry, and something darker beneath it.

“I’ll be right back,” Mike says. His expression hardens, and he excuses himself, his

jaw tight as he strides toward the exit. I watch him go, a flicker of unease settling in my chest.

After a few minutes, I step outside, hoping there's no real issue. But the cool night air isn't as refreshing as I'd hoped.

Then I hear a voice behind me, sharp and unwelcome.

"Becky."

I whirl around to see Paul stepping out of the shadows, his expression dark and angry.

Before he can say another word, another voice cuts through the tension.

"She said leave her alone."

I turn to see Mike standing a few feet away, his eyes locked on Paul with a look that could stop anyone in their tracks.

Relief floods through me as Mike steps closer, his presence solid and unyielding.

Paul glares at Mike but doesn't argue. Instead, he mutters something under his breath and disappears into the night, leaving me trembling.

Mike doesn't say a word. He just stays close. And right now, that's enough.

Chapter eight

Mike

Stepping onto the porch with my coffee in hand, I take in the sunrise over the mountains.

The morning air is cool, but there's an edge of dryness that makes me uneasy. Wildfire season always puts everyone on high alert, and this year feels especially tense.

Lulu and my mother have gone to visit my aunt in the city. I'm left alone with Becky, and somehow, it feels just right.

I take a sip of coffee and glance toward the horizon, where faint wisps of smoke are just visible in the distance.

The fires aren't close enough to be a direct threat to Junction Falls yet, but it's only a matter of time before the winds shift or the flames grow stronger.

"Mike," Pete calls from the barn, waving me over.

Setting my coffee mug down, I head toward him, already mentally running through the list of tasks for the day. But before I can get there, my radio crackles to life on my belt.

"All units report to the old sawmill on Highway 12. Structure fire, active flames.

Repeat, structure fire.”

My heart sinks. The old sawmill has been abandoned for years, but it’s a tinderbox waiting to go up in flames. Worse, it’s close to the edge of town, where the wildfires have already left the brush dry and brittle.

“I’ve got to go,” I tell Pete, already heading for my truck. He nods, his expression tight with understanding.

By the time I arrive at the firehouse, the parking lot is filled with other firefighters’ cars.

From the outside, the firehouse is an impressive brick-and-stone building, standing tall with large bay doors that house the fire trucks and emergency vehicles. The town’s emblem is emblazoned on the side of the building—a symbol of strength and unity. A tall flagpole stands near the entrance, the American flag waving proudly, and a memorial plaque sits at the base, honoring firefighters who have served before.

Inside, the large garage-style bay holds the fire trucks, hoses, and heavy-duty equipment. A row of firefighter gear—helmets, turnout coats, gloves, and boots—hangs neatly on hooks, each labeled with a firefighter’s name.

The high ceilings and industrial-style lighting usually give the space a rugged, functional feel. But right now, it feels too small, as if the walls are closing in. The air is filled with the hum of dispatch radios crackling to life.

The crew is hurriedly suiting up. It’s a small town and many of us are part of the volunteer force. Burt greets me with a grim nod, and we exchange a few words about the strategy for containing the fire.

“We’re short today,” Burt says as we climb into the truck. “A lot of the guys are out helping with wildfire containment.”

I nod, my jaw tightening. “We’ll have to make do.”

The ride to the sawmill is tense, the silence broken only by the hum of the engine and the occasional crackle of the radio. When we arrive, the scene is worse than I expected. Flames are already licking at the edges of the building, black smoke billowing into the sky.

The heat is intense as we jump into action, unrolling hoses and assessing the situation. Burt barks orders, and the team moves like a well-oiled machine, each of us falling into our roles without hesitation.

Hours blur together as we fight the fire, sweat pouring down my back and smoke stinging my eyes. The flames are relentless, consuming everything in their path, but we hold our ground. The goal is to keep the fire contained, to stop it from spreading to the nearby brush and turning into an uncontrollable disaster.

“Mike!” Burt shouts, pointing toward the north side of the building. “We need backup over here!”

I head in his direction, dragging a hose with me. The heat is oppressive, and the roar of the flames drowns out everything else. I’m so focused on the fire in front of me that I almost miss the sound of the roof creaking above.

It happens in an instant. A section of the roof collapses, sending debris raining down. I dive out of the way, but a beam catches my shoulder, knocking me to the ground. Pain shoots through me, sharp and immediate, but I grit my teeth and push myself up.

“Mike!” Burt’s voice cuts through the chaos as he rushes toward me.

“I’m fine,” I manage, though the throbbing in my shoulder says otherwise.

“You’re not fine,” Burt snaps, his eyes narrowing as he takes in the blood seeping through my gear. “You’re done. Get out of here.”

Reluctantly, I let him help me to the truck, where one of the paramedics looks me over. The injury isn’t life-threatening, but it’s enough to sideline me for the rest of the fight. I refuse their offer to go to the ER. Frustration burns hotter than the fire as I sit there, watching my team carry on without me.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

By the time we get back to the firehouse, the adrenaline has worn off, and the pain in my shoulder is impossible to ignore. Burt insists on driving me home, muttering something about not trusting me to take it easy.

When we pull up to the ranch, Becky is already waiting on the porch, her face pale with worry. She rushes toward the truck as soon as she sees me, her eyes wide.

“Mike! What happened?” she asks, her voice trembling.

“Just a scratch,” I say, trying to downplay it, but she doesn’t look convinced.

“A scratch doesn’t make you look like this,” she says, her hands hovering near my injured shoulder as though she’s afraid to touch me.

“It was the sawmill fire. I’m fine, Becky. Really,” I sigh, exhaustion weighing heavily on me.

She doesn’t look convinced, but she steps back as Burt helps me out of the truck.

“Keep an eye on him,” Burt tells her before heading back to the driver’s seat. “He’s not going to rest unless someone makes him.”

“Don’t worry,” Becky says, her tone firm. “I’ll make sure he does.”

Burt drives off, and I follow Becky into the house, my steps slower than usual. I can feel her watching me, the worry in her eyes impossible to ignore.

“You should sit down,” she says, guiding me to the couch.

“I’m fine,” I insist, but the look she gives me silences any further protest.

“You’re not fine,” she says, her voice soft but determined. “And until you are, I’ll be here to help.”

Her words hit me harder than I expect, and for a moment, all I can do is nod. I grab a quick shower, careful not to get any water on the bandage the paramedics placed on my shoulder.

As I sink into the couch, my shoulder screaming in protest, I notice a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye. B., Becky’s tiny gray kitten, hops up onto the armrest and stares at me with her wide green eyes. She pads closer, sniffing at my injured arm like she knows something’s wrong.

“Hey, B.,” I murmur, managing a small smile despite the throbbing pain. “Are you keeping an eye on me too?”

Becky appears with a first-aid kit and a glass of water, setting them down on the coffee table. “Looks like she’s already taking her job seriously,” she says with a soft laugh.

B. meows, then curls up next to me, pressing her tiny body against my good side as if to offer comfort.

“Smart cat,” I say, glancing at Becky. “She knows how to make someone feel better.”

Becky smiles. “You need to take it easy,” she says. “And like it or not, you’ve got me here to make sure you don’t overdo it.”

The weight of the day finally catches up with me. But as I lean back, Becky's presence and the kitten's warmth beside me make the pain and worry feel just a little more bearable.

Chapter nine

Becky

I carry a tray with coffee, a small plate of toast, and jam to the living room.

Mike is sitting on the couch, his injured arm resting on a pillow, and B. is curled up beside him as if she's claimed him as her personal guardian.

Glancing around the home's warm, rustic interior, I feel an unexpected sense of connection. The exposed wooden beams, vaulted ceilings, and stone fireplace make the space both grand and cozy. The walls are lined with family photos, antique ranch tools, and shelves filled with well-worn books on farming, horses, and country life.

Wide-planked hardwood floors shine with a rich caramel hue, softened by handwoven rugs that add warmth and color. A plush leather couch and an assortment of oversized armchairs surround the large stone fireplace—the heart of the home on chilly nights. Mike reclines on one of the sofas, his feet propped on a leather ottoman.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, setting the tray down on the coffee table.

He glances up, his dark eyes meeting mine. For a second, something vulnerable flickers across his expression.

“Better,” he says, though his voice is gruff.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

I sit beside him, careful not to jostle the kitten. “Let me check the bandage. It might need freshening up.”

Mike hesitates, clearly not used to being fussed over, but finally nods, allowing me to undo the makeshift sling I’d rigged the night before. As I unwrap the gauze, I try to keep my movements gentle, though my hands tremble slightly. Years of arranging flowers have kept my fingers nimble, but this is different.

“You’re good at this,” Mike murmurs, his voice softer than I expected.

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” I reply, thinking of the countless times I’ve patched up friends or family. “You’re not the first stubborn person I’ve had to take care of.”

His lips twitch, almost a smile. “Stubborn, huh?”

“Oh, definitely,” I tease, meeting his gaze. “But I think that’s what makes you good at what you do. Stubbornness is just determination in disguise.”

Mike chuckles, a low, warm sound that makes my chest tighten. “You’ve got me figured out, huh?”

“Not yet,” I say, grinning. “But I’m getting there.”

As I finish rewrapping his bandage, we settle into an easy rhythm of conversation. Mike surprises me by opening up, sharing stories from his time as a firefighter and the challenges of running the ranch.

“Have you ever thought about leaving?” I ask, curious.

He shakes his head. “This place is home. It’s not perfect, but it’s where I’m meant to be.”

I nod. “I feel the same about the shop. It’s not just a business—it’s a part of me. When it burned, it felt like losing a piece of myself.”

Mike’s expression softens, and for a moment, the silence between us is filled with an unspoken connection.

“What about you?” he asks. “What got you into flowers?”

I smile, the memory both warm and bittersweet. “My aunt. She taught me the language of flowers—how each bloom has its own meaning. She said flowers can say the things we can’t.”

“She sounds like she was a special person,” Mike says, his tone gentle.

“She was,” I say, my voice thick with emotion. “I try to honor her every day in what I do.”

Later that afternoon, Pete stops by to go over the day's tasks with Mike. He's sharp, confident and has an easy way of talking that makes people trust him.

“You’re in good hands with me,” Pete says with a grin as he sits across from Mike. “I’ve got everything under control.”

Mike leans back against the couch, looking more at ease than I’ve ever seen him. “I know. That’s why I hired you.”

The two of them talk shop, going over everything from grazing rotations to equipment maintenance. I listen from the kitchen, impressed by the quiet respect between them.

“You’ve done a lot for this ranch,” Mike says, his tone serious. “I’ve been thinking... maybe it’s time to make it official.”

Pete raises an eyebrow. “Official how?”

“Offering you a stake,” Mike replies. “You’ve earned it.”

The surprise on Pete’s face quickly turns to gratitude. “I don’t know what to say. That means a lot, Mike. Thank you.”

Their handshake seals the deal. For the first time since his injury, I see Mike completely relax.

“Tea to celebrate?” I ask, beaming.

They both laugh.

The next morning, I head to the newly rebuilt shop to start organizing the space for the grand reopening.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

The renovations are beautiful, and the community's support has been overwhelming. Donations of furniture, supplies and even a stunning new storefront sign have poured in.

As I walk through the shop, picturing it fully restored, my heart swells with gratitude. This place is more than a business—it's a symbol of resilience and love.

But my happiness is short-lived.

A sharp crack echoes through the shop.

I spin around, my heart pounding. A brick lies on the floor near the front window, surrounded by shattered glass.

Dread curls in my stomach.

Tied to the brick is a piece of paper, the words scrawled in angry, uneven letters:

This isn't over.

I stare at the note, my pulse hammering in my ears. The words blur as fear creeps in, cold and paralyzing. My hands tremble as I untie the crumpled paper, half-hoping I imagined it. But the words glare back at me, sharp and real:

This isn't over.

I swallow hard, forcing myself to stay calm. My first instinct is to call the police, but

my fingers hover over my phone. Instead, I take a deep breath and dial the only person I can think of.

Mike picks up on the first ring. “Becky?”

I can barely get the words out. “Mike, someone threw a brick through the shop window.”

Silence. Then a sharp inhale.

“Are you okay?” His voice is suddenly hard, focused.

“I’m fine,” I say quickly. “It happened while I was in the back. But there’s... there’s a note.”

“I’m coming,” he says immediately, then the line goes dead.

It feels like an eternity before his truck screeches to a halt outside. He strides toward me, his expression a mix of anger and concern. His sharp gaze sweeps the shop, landing on the shattered window, the brick, the crumpled note.

“Let me see it,” he says, his voice low and controlled.

I hand it to him. His jaw tightens as he reads the words. When he looks back at me, his dark eyes are stormy—his protective instincts blazing.

“This has to be Paul,” he mutters.

“Who else could it be?” I whisper.

Mike runs a hand through his hair, pacing the small space like a caged lion. “He’s

escalating,” he mutters. “This isn’t just him being a nuisance anymore—it’s dangerous.”

A shiver runs through me.

Mike notices and immediately softens, stepping closer. His good hand rests lightly on my shoulder.

“Becky, listen to me,” he says, his voice steady. “You’re not dealing with this alone. I’ll make sure you’re safe. No matter what.”

The sincerity in his eyes makes my breath hitch.

For the first time since seeing that note, I feel like I can breathe again.

“We should call the police,” I manage to say, my voice small.

Mike nods. “I’ll handle it.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

As he steps away to make the call, I glance around the shop, the fear still gnawing at the edges of my mind. This place was supposed to be a fresh start, a symbol of hope. But now, it feels like it's under siege.

I turn back to Mike, his strong, steady presence filling the room. Whatever happens next, I know I'm not facing it alone.

Chapter ten

Mike

The red and blue lights of the police cruiser flash outside the shop, reflecting off the shattered glass on the ground.

Officer Nathan Cooper steps out, his familiar no-nonsense expression softened slightly when he spots Becky. Nathan and I go way back—he's one of the guys I trust implicitly in this town.

He gives me a nod before turning his attention to Becky, who looks pale but composed.

"Nathan," I say, walking over to meet him. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

"Of course," he replies, shaking my hand. His gaze shifts to Becky, his tone turning gentler. "Miss Gibson, I'm sorry this happened. Why don't you tell me what you know?"

Becky clutches the note in her hands as she explains everything—about the fire, the brick, and the escalating threats from Paul. I stay close, watching the way her voice wavers but never breaks. She's stronger than she realizes, but I can see the fear she's trying to mask.

Nathan listens intently, jotting notes in his pad. When she finishes, he leans against the counter, his expression serious. "Based on what you've described, it's clear this is harassment. I strongly recommend filing a restraining order against Paul. It'll put legal pressure on him to stay away, and if he doesn't, we'll have grounds to escalate."

Becky nods, her fingers tightening around the paper. "I'll do whatever I need to," she says, her voice steady despite the tremor I can see in her hands.

"Good," Nathan says, offering her a reassuring smile. "We'll also increase patrols around the shop and your place. And make sure you have good insurance on the shop—it'll help cover any damages if something like this happens again."

Becky glances at me, and I can tell she's overwhelmed by the sheer number of things to handle. "Mike, can you—?"

"Don't worry," I interrupt, resting a hand on her shoulder. "We'll take care of it together."

Nathan gives me a knowing look before wrapping up his report. "You've got a good guy here," he says, tipping his hat. "If anything else happens, call me immediately."

"How about a cup of coffee?" I want to get some details from Nathan without alarming Becky. She says she's going to go for a walk to the café and see if she can ask around about the events of the day. It's not far, and I know she will be around friends, so I acquiesce.

We go back to the firehouse, and Nathan gives me the background on Paul and his suspicions after I tell him all that I know.

Nathan leans back in his chair at the firehouse, cradling a steaming mug of coffee in one hand while giving me a knowing look.

“You’re getting attached to that little furball, huh?” he teases, nodding toward B., who is curled up on my lap, purring like a tiny motor.

I glance down at her, scratching gently behind her ears. “She’s a good kitten,” I say, avoiding the obvious truth—I can’t seem to let her go.

Nathan chuckles, shaking his head. “Funny how things work out.”

I arch a brow. “What do you mean?”

His expression softens as he sets down his mug. “Because I was the one who found her.”

I sit up a little straighter. “You what?”

He nods, his face taking on a serious edge. “A few months ago, I got called out to do a welfare check on the old guy who lived on the outskirts of town. He ran a junkyard—one of those places full of rusted cars, broken-down sheds, all kinds of mess. His neighbors hadn’t seen him in a while and were worried.”

I listen intently as Nathan continues, his voice dropping slightly.

“When I got there, the place was a disaster. Trash piled up, car parts everywhere. But the guy? He was fine. Just old, stubborn, and didn’t think he needed anyone checking up on him.” Nathan shakes his head. “But that wasn’t what caught my attention.”

I already know where this is going, but I don't interrupt.

“There was a little makeshift nest tucked between two old tires,” he says, his gaze distant. “Three kittens. Tiny things. No sign of the mom, and the guy didn't care about them. Said they ‘just showed up.’”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Glancing down at B., I suddenly picture her huddled in the cold, mewling for warmth and safety.

“What’d you do?” I ask, my voice quieter than before.

Nathan exhales. “I picked them up. Figured they’d never make it out there on their own. I took them to the shelter in town—except for one.”

I raise a brow. “You kept one?”

A rare, sheepish grin crosses his face. “Yeah. The little guy wouldn’t stop climbing up my arm in the truck. I took it as a sign.”

I smirk. “Didn’t peg you as a cat guy.”

Nathan shrugs. “Didn’t peg you as one either.”

I look down at B., who is now fast asleep in my lap, her tiny body curled into the fabric of my shirt like she belongs there. Maybe she does.

Nathan nods toward her. “Looks like you got one of the others.”

The realization settles deep in my chest. “And Becky got her back,” I say.

Nathan studies me for a long moment before smirking. “Yeah, funny how that worked out.”

I shake my head, but I can't help the small smile tugging at my lips.

B. wasn't just a kitten that wandered into my life. She had a whole story before this—one that somehow, miraculously, led her to Becky and me.

And for the first time in a long time, it feels like things are exactly where they're meant to be.

After Nathan leaves, I pick up Becky and we head back to the ranch. She's quiet during the ride, staring out the window as B. snoozes in her carrier on her lap. I want to say something to ease her worry, but the words don't come. Instead, I focus on getting her home safe.

Once we're back, Becky heads to her room to rest while I settle into the living room with B. The kitten stretches out on the couch, her tiny paws batting at the edge of a throw pillow.

"Alright, B.," I mutter, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees. "How am I supposed to fix this?"

B. tilts her head, her green eyes locking on mine as if she's waiting for an answer. I chuckle, running a hand through my hair. "Yeah, I don't know either."

That evening, Becky joins me in the kitchen, looking a little more like herself. She busies herself with tidying up, but I can tell something's weighing on her.

"What's on your mind?" I break the silence.

She hesitates, her fingers tracing the edge of the mug. "It's just... all of this. The fire, the threats. I thought I'd put Paul behind me, but it feels like I'm back where I started."

“You’re not,” I say firmly. “You’ve built something amazing, Becky. Don’t let him take that from you.”

She looks up, her eyes shining with emotion. “Thank you, Mike. For everything. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Her words hit me harder than they should, and I take a steadying breath before replying. “You’re not alone in this. I promise.”

Chapter eleven

Becky

Standing in the kitchen, my hands wrapped around a warm mug of tea, I stare out at the rolling fields.

My apartment is ready to move back into, and I’ve arranged with the girls to help me out. I reflect on my time at Thorn Ranch and the family’s hospitality.

Lulu has always been a great friend, and I have so much in common with Julia Thorn. They have made me feel like part of their family.

And Mike. Well, that’s another thing altogether.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

The past few weeks have been a whirlwind—fires, threats, fake dating that doesn't feel so fake anymore. And now, standing here, I finally allow myself to admit the truth.

I have feelings for Mike. Real ones.

It's terrifying, but it's also freeing.

I've spent so long letting my past dictate my future. Paul made me doubt myself, made me feel like I was lucky to have any love at all. But love—real love—shouldn't feel like an obligation. It shouldn't feel like something that traps you.

It should feel like this. Safe. Steady. Like the way Mike looks at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention.

A slow breath fills my lungs, and I straighten my shoulders. This fear, this doubt—I'm done with it. I refuse to let Paul or my past have any more control over me.

I'm choosing me.

I'm choosing the way I feel when I'm around Mike.

Sitting cross-legged on the couch in the ranch living room, B. is curled up in my lap. She's been my little shadow since she found her way back to me, always listening as if she understands more than she lets on.

“Okay, B.,” I say, scratching behind her ears. “I need to practice something, and you’re the best listener I know.”

B. blinks up at me, completely invested in what I’m about to say.

I take a deep breath. “I like Mike,” I admit. “Like, really like him. More than I should, more than I ever expected.”

The words tumble out easier than I thought they would, as if they’d been waiting to be spoken.

“I know we started this whole thing as a lie, but somewhere along the way, it stopped feeling fake. And now I don’t know how to tell him the truth without ruining everything.”

B. lets out a tiny chirp, nudging her head against my hand.

“Yeah, I know. I should just tell him. But what if he doesn’t feel the same way?” I sigh, rubbing my forehead.

B. meows again, as if telling me that’s a ridiculous question.

I laugh softly, running my fingers through her fur. “You’re right. He does feel something. I see it in the way he looks at me, the way he touches me like he’s afraid I might disappear. But I don’t know if it’s enough.”

B. lets out a long purr, curling deeper into my lap as if to say, Just do it already.

“Fine,” I whisper. “I’ll think about it.”

The girls help me move back into my newly renovated apartment above the florist shop. It's even better than before—brighter, cozier, filled with love from all the hands that helped restore it.

Ellie flops onto my couch, stretching her arms behind her head. "I have to say, Becky, this place is stunning. If I weren't completely settled in my own house, I'd move in myself."

Maggie Ann walks in with a tray of homemade pastries, placing them on the coffee table. "It smells like fresh paint and possibility."

Lulu grins as she pops open a bottle of sparkling cider. "And new beginnings," she adds, raising her glass.

Josie kicks off her shoes and sits cross-legged on the floor, stealing a cookie from the tray. "Honestly, I'm just glad we have an excuse for a sleepover. It's been way too long since we had a good old-fashioned pajama party."

We all laugh, settling into our usual rhythm, and for the first time in a long time, I feel like me again.

The night is filled with laughter, reminiscing about the chaos of the renovation. We talk about the fire, about Mike being overprotective, about the rumors swirling around town that our fake relationship is too convincing.

"Speaking of which, when are you going to admit you actually like the man?" Ellie asks with a huge grin on her face.

"Excuse me?" I nearly choke on my cider.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“Oh, come on,” Maggie Ann says, nudging me. “You like Mike. You love Mike.”

Lulu grins. “And let’s be real, he’s completely gone for you too.”

I open my mouth to protest, but Josie holds up a hand. “Nope. We all see it. Just tell us the truth. What are you waiting for?”

I chew my lip, looking around at my friends. They know me too well.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I want to, but... it’s scary.”

Maggie Ann pats my leg. “The good ones usually are.”

We stay up late into the night, laughing, eating way too much sugar, and talking about everything under the sun. But even after the lights are out and the others drift off to sleep, I lay awake, staring at the ceiling, my mind spinning.

Maybe they’re right.

Maybe it’s time.

The next morning, the girls have disbanded, and I am left to take in my solitude.

I wrap my sweater tighter around me as I stand on my balcony, staring down at the street below.

The scent of fresh bread from Maggie Ann’s bakery mingles with the crisp morning

air. She and Josie had to leave early to get the baking started at 5 a.m. I don't envy their schedule. Ellie left to go for a run before her first morning meetings. Lulu decided to visit the bookstore for inspiration before opening the store.

The shop is officially reopening next week, and there's so much to do.

But all I can think about is Mike.

And whether or not I'm brave enough to tell him the truth.

The town is waking up—shop doors opening, friendly waves exchanged between neighbors, the comforting rhythm of small-town life settling into place.

But I don't feel settled.

I feel like I'm standing on the edge of something.

I lean against the railing, my hands gripping the cool metal as my thoughts drift to Mike. Tell him the truth, my friends had said last night. As if it were that simple.

What if I do, and it ruins everything?

What if I tell him how I feel, and he only sees this as a duty—his protective nature getting the best of him?

But deep down, I know that isn't true.

Mike isn't the kind of man to pretend. He doesn't say things he doesn't mean. And when he looks at me... it feels real.

I close my eyes, letting the warm morning breeze brush against my skin.

Maybe it's time to be brave.

Down below, a familiar truck is parked in front of my shop. That's the closest I've been to seeing Mike lately. I know he's been busy, but it almost seems like he's trying to avoid me. I must be imagining things. Maybe.

It's time to tell Mike how I feel.

Now, if only I can find him.

Chapter twelve

Mike

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

I'm not a man who second-guesses himself, but today, I can't shake the nerves.

Keeping a secret in Junction Falls is about as easy as keeping a barn door shut in a windstorm. Everyone talks, everyone has an opinion, and somehow, the whole town always knows what's happening before it even happens.

Which is exactly why I have to be careful.

I glance down at my phone, reading over the texts I just got from Ellie, Lulu, and Maggie Ann. They're already knee-deep in planning Becky's surprise Blooming Festival, and if I don't step in soon, I have a feeling it'll turn into something so big the mayor will want to make it an annual town tradition.

Which wouldn't be the worst thing.

But this isn't about the town.

It's about her.

Standing in the middle of Junction Falls' town square, I glance around at the people who have gathered, each playing their part in something bigger than just me and Becky. The entire town is coming together for this—friends, neighbors, even strangers who have admired Becky's kindness from afar.

And she has no idea.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I glance at my watch. I have three days to pull this off.

Three days to give Becky something she'll never forget. Something that proves to her that she belongs here, that she's loved—not just by me, but by this whole town.

Pete walks up, clipboard in hand, shaking his head at me with a smirk. “You know, for a guy who usually keeps his cool, you look like you're about to pass out.”

“Just making sure everything goes right,” I say, shooting him a dry look.

He laughs. “Mike, it's Becky. She's already crazy about you.”

I don't argue because he doesn't know how much I need this to be perfect. I can't mess this up.

Walking over to the patio at Cake Walk Café, I join Becky's friends, who are chatting away animatedly. Lulu and Maggie Ann are already sitting at a corner table, a pile of notes and papers between them. Ellie arrives seconds later, balancing a to-go coffee in one hand and what looks like a flower catalog in the other.

Pete, my ranch partner, and Nathan from the police department have also volunteered to make sure everything comes together. But the downside of all this?

“Alright,” I say, pulling out a chair. “What's the damage?”

Lulu beams. “Oh, we're already halfway there. You are gonna love this.”

“I don't need to love it. Becky does.”

Maggie Ann nudges a notebook toward me, flipping it open to a page labeled Becky's Blooming Festival—A Celebration of Love, Community, and Growth.

I blink. “That's... a lot.”

Ellie grins. “We had a lot of ideas.”

I glance through the details—a floral display outside Flourish Floral, a town-wide flower arrangement competition, a fundraiser for the animal shelter, and a tea garden pop-up in Lulu’s bookstore.

But the most important part?

A dedication to Becky’s grandmother, featuring the letters she left behind and the wisdom she passed down. Becky had enough money from the insurance to rebuild and pay for her expenses until then. By my estimation, though, I know it won’t be enough to have the huge grand reopening she will need to restart the business properly.

I clear my throat, feeling something tight settle in my chest. “She’s gonna love this.”

My sister, Lulu, leans forward, her eyes twinkling. “And she’s gonna love you for doing it.”

I run a hand over my jaw. “I don’t know how she feels about me.”

Maggie Ann sighs dramatically. “Oh, we know. But this—this is gonna show her just how much you care about her.”

Glancing around the table, I realize for the first time that these women aren’t just Becky’s friends—they’re her family. They’ve been with her through everything, and right now, they’re pulling together to make this happen just as much for her as I am.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

All the proceeds from the event will go toward the grand reopening, and hopefully, it will be enough to get the word out about it too.

I exhale, nodding. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

I barely see Becky.

And that’s a problem.

The hardest part about all of this?

Staying away from Becky for three days. I wouldn’t be able to hide what I’m up to, and I don’t want to ruin the surprise for her.

She’s already noticing the distance, the way I’ve been working late, running “errands,” avoiding our usual slow mornings together.

Last night, she gave me a look—half confusion, half worry—when I cut our conversation short, saying I had to take care of something on the ranch.

I hated it.

But the look on her face when she sees what we’ve been planning?

That’s gonna make all of this worth it.

It’s not intentional, but every time I reach for my phone to check in, I stop myself. If I

see her, I'll spill everything. And if I tell her, it won't be the same. It has to be a surprise.

But I don't realize how much she's been noticing the distance—until I catch sight of her one evening across the street from the shop.

She's talking to Lulu, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, her head nodding in short, clipped movements. Even from a distance, I can tell something's bothering her.

I step forward, almost ready to go to her, when Pete grabs my arm. "Not yet," he warns. "We have work to do first."

I hesitate, glancing back at her, but then I nod. I need to stick to the plan.

Chapter thirteen

Becky

The grand reopening of Flourish Floral is just days away, and I should be focusing on making sure I don't run out of stock before then. My apartment had been completed first, and that's when I had moved in.

I toured the rebuilt property. It's pretty much ready to go.

Connected to the back of the shop by a charming arched doorway, the hot house greenhouse is where I will grow and care for my more exotic and temperamental plants.

The glass walls and ceiling, framed by white-painted wrought iron, allow sunlight to stream in from every angle, making it feel like a hidden garden paradise. Along the back wall, a potting station is set up with clay pots, gardening gloves, and nutrient-

rich soil, where I will tend to seedlings and repot plants in need of extra care.

I really like the new fridge room. Tucked behind the main shop floor, a temperature-controlled walk-in floral fridge is where the most delicate flowers will be stored, keeping them fresh for custom orders and special events.

The updated layout will be better than before. I need to think about the reopening.

But all I can think about is Mike.

And how I barely see him anymore.

At first, I didn't think much of it. He's been recovering, dealing with the ranch, still helping out at the fire station. But then he started dodging my calls, and every time I asked Lulu if she'd seen him, she got weirdly quiet.

Something is off.

The worst part is, I haven't even had a chance to tell him how I feel.

I pace around the shop, running my fingers over the smooth petals of a fresh bouquet of peonies. The shop is coming together beautifully, but I can't enjoy it when I have this gnawing doubt in my chest.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“Okay,” I mutter to myself, taking a deep breath. “You’re being ridiculous. You know Mike isn’t like that. He’s not pulling away because he’s losing interest.”

At least, I hope he isn’t.

The soft chime of the shop’s bell fills the air as I arrange a fresh bouquet of daisies and peonies in a glass vase. The scent of roses, eucalyptus, and lavender drifts around me, a comforting reminder that the shop is alive again. The town has rallied behind me in ways I never expected, and their unwavering support fuels my resolve to make my florist business thrive once more.

Since the opening, orders have been pouring in—bouquets for anniversaries, table arrangements for the Cake Walk Café, corsages for a high school dance.

Even Maggie Ann and Ellie have stopped by to place orders for their shops, wanting fresh flowers for their displays. It feels like my world, once tipped off balance, is finding its rhythm again.

But there’s still one thing unsettled.

Mike.

I have been trying to find the right moment to talk to him about everything—the feelings that have been building between us and the way my heart seems to know he’s the one.

I’ve been carrying these thoughts like a bouquet of fragile blooms, afraid that if I

move too fast, they'll fall apart.

Today, I'm done waiting.

It's Friday night, and I've had enough. I march straight to the ranch, fully prepared to demand some kind of explanation. But when I get there, the place is practically deserted.

Pete greets me at the barn, wiping his hands on a rag. "Hey, Becky. Looking for Mike?"

"Yeah," I say, planting my hands on my hips. "Where is he?"

Pete grins like he knows something I don't. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Pete," I warn.

He just chuckles. "Be patient."

I narrow my eyes but don't press further. Something is definitely going on, and I don't like being left in the dark.

I find Mike leaning against the porch railing of the ranch house, B. curled up on his lap. The sight of him there, relaxed and at ease, tugs at something deep inside me.

He looks up as I step onto the porch, and for a moment, his gaze lingers, like he's trying to figure out what's on my mind.

"Hey," he says, giving B. a slow scratch behind her ears.

"Hey," I reply, taking the seat beside him. The cool evening air carries the scent of

honeysuckle from the garden, wrapping us in quiet intimacy.

For a long moment, we sit there in comfortable silence, the only sound being the distant whinny of a horse from the stables.

Then, finally, I speak.

“This thing between us,” I start, forcing myself to be brave. “It is becoming something more than I expected, Mike. And I think we both know it.”

His jaw tightens, and for a second, I worry I’ve said too much. But then he exhales, long and deep, like he’s been holding something in.

“You’re right,” he admits. “It has felt more involved for a long time.”

The weight of his words settles between us, shifting the ground we’ve been standing on.

“I don’t want to ignore it anymore,” I whisper.

Mike reaches over, his fingers brushing against mine, slow and deliberate. “Me either,” he says, his voice rough with emotion.

He turns to me fully, his hand warm as he takes mine. “Becky, I don’t just care about you—I love you. And not in some easy, casual way. You make me feel things I never expected, never planned for. And I don’t want to go another day without making that clear.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

My breath catches, my heart soaring.

“I love you too,” I whisper.

The last of my fears fall away.

After we sit there for what feels like forever, wrapped in the comfort of our confessions, Mike shifts beside me, like he’s remembering something.

“There’s something I need to show you,” he says.

He reaches down and lifts a small, aged wooden box, setting it on the table between us. The surface is worn smooth, the edges slightly singed, a remnant of the fire. The intricate floral carvings along the lid catch the fading sunlight, revealing craftsmanship that’s both delicate and strong.

“This was found inside the walls when they were rebuilding the shop,” Mike explains. “The guys pulled it out from the back storage area. It must have been hidden there for years.”

I trace my fingers over the carved patterns, a strange sense of familiarity stirring inside me. And then, all at once, realization crashes over me.

“This belonged to my grandmother,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Mike’s brows lift in surprise. “You’re sure?”

I nod, my heartbeat picking up. “I used to see it when I was little—she always kept it on the top shelf of her closet. I remember asking her what was inside once, and she told me it held secrets.”

Mike leans in, his eyes locked on mine. “Do you know what kind of secrets?”

I shake my head, running my thumb over the small brass lock securing the lid. It’s sturdy, untouched, like it’s been waiting for someone to find it.

The air between us shifts, thick with the weight of discovery.

“What do you think is inside?” Mike asks.

I swallow hard, my fingers gripping the edges of the box.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But I think it’s time to find out.”

I glance up at Mike, and he gives me a small nod, his fingers curling over mine as we hold the box between us.

“Whatever’s in there,” he says, his voice low and certain, “we’ll figure it out together.”

And somehow, I know we will.

Chapter fourteen

Mike

The box sits between us on the worn pine coffee table, its presence heavier than its actual weight.

It's small but remarkably sturdy, carved from dark walnut wood, its edges softened with time. Intricate floral engravings—roses, lilacs, and peonies—adorn the surface, their delicate patterns carefully etched by hand. The brass hinges and lock glint softly in the dim light, aged but still secure.

The box has a history, one that Becky never knew existed until now. It was discovered inside the rebuilt walls of the shop, hidden away for decades like a forgotten secret waiting to be unearthed.

Becky's fingers trace the carved floral patterns on the lid, her brow furrowed in thought. I can see the battle inside her—the desire to know the truth warring with the fear of what she might find.

Nearby, B. the kitten is curled up on a plaid blanket draped over a chair, her tiny paws twitching in sleep.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “Are you ready?”

She exhales, nods, then hands me the box. “We still need the key.”

I turn it over in my hands, examining the brass lock. It's old but still sturdy, likely untouched for decades. “Maybe we don't need a key,” I say, setting it down. “Sometimes, these old locks can be picked.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Becky raises an eyebrow. “What are you, a locksmith now?”

I smirk. “Let’s just say I’ve had experience with stuck doors and jammed toolboxes.”

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my multi-tool, flipping open the smallest screwdriver. Becky watches as I work the tiny tool into the keyhole, gently wiggling it. There’s a soft click, and the lock pops open.

Becky gasps. “Mike, how—?”

“Years of dealing with stubborn ranch equipment,” I grin and give her a quick wink.

She rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue, reaching for the box with trembling fingers. Slowly, she lifts the lid.

Inside, the scent of aged parchment and dried lavender drifts into the air. Neatly stacked inside are several old letters, tied together with a faded blue ribbon.

Becky’s breath catches. “These... these are from my grandmother.”

She carefully unties the ribbon, her hands reverent as she picks up the first letter. I watch as her eyes scan the handwriting, her lips parting in shock.

“She wrote these to me,” she whispers, her voice barely audible. “Like she knew I’d find them someday.”

The letters inside, wrapped in a faded blue ribbon, smell faintly of lavender and

parchment, the ink slightly smudged but the words still bold and clear. Each letter holds pieces of her grandmother's wisdom, stories, and guidance meant for Becky, as if her past self knew Becky would need them one day.

I shift closer, watching her read, the words spilling into the air like a quiet melody.

The first letter is dated years ago, long before Becky was old enough to understand the depth of its meaning.

"My dearest Becky,

If you are reading this, then life has led you back to the flower shop, to the place where love and dreams grow together. I always knew your heart was meant for this. You carry light within you, and though there will be times when you doubt yourself, always remember—flowers do not question their right to bloom. Neither should you.

Love is the same way. It does not follow a plan, nor does it fit into neat little boxes. It is wild, unpredictable, and often arrives when you least expect it. But when it does, embrace it. Do not let fear keep you from something beautiful.

You will face trials, my dear, but you are strong. Never doubt your worth, and never let anyone take away the magic that is uniquely yours.

With all my love, Your Grandma."

I glance at Becky, watching as tears slip silently down her cheeks. Her fingers tremble against the parchment, her breathing uneven.

"Becky," I say softly.

She presses the letter to her chest, swallowing hard. "She knew," she whispers. "She

knew I would struggle with this. That I'd doubt myself. That I'd be afraid of love."

She looks up at me, and something inside my chest clenches at the raw vulnerability in her eyes.

"You do belong here," I say firmly. "You belong at the shop. With these flowers. With this town." I hesitate, then add, "With me."

Becky lets out a shaky breath, a small, tearful laugh escaping her lips. "How do you always know exactly what to say?"

I reach for her hand, holding it between my own. "Because I know you, Becky. And I'm not going anywhere."

She nods, squeezing my hand back. But I see it—the conflict still lingering in her eyes, the war between fear and belief.

One letter isn't enough to undo years of doubt. But maybe, just maybe, it's the beginning of something new.

Becky carefully folds the letter, placing it back inside the box before looking at the others. "I need time to go through them," she says quietly.

"Of course," I say, giving her space.

She hesitates, biting her lip. "Mike... what if I can't do this?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

I frown. “Do what?”

She gestures around—at the shop, the letters, the weight of everything suddenly on her shoulders. “What if I’m not enough?”

My chest tightens at the pain in her voice. I cup her cheek, tilting her chin so she has to meet my eyes. “Becky, you are more than enough. You always have been.”

She leans into my touch for a brief moment, her eyes searching mine. Then she nods, like she’s trying to believe it, like she wants to believe it.

But the question lingers in the air, unspoken.

Can she?

The final letter, still unread, sits atop the others.

Becky’s fingers trace the delicate engravings on the box, her heart pounding with the weight of what she might uncover next. She glances at me. I reach out, resting my hand over hers, trying my best to ground her.

“No matter what’s inside,” I say, my voice low, “you’re not facing it alone.”

Becky swallows hard, nodding. The breeze rustles through the trees, carrying the scent of sage and summer rain. The world feels still, suspended in this moment of discovery.

With a deep breath, Becky carefully lifts the final letter from the box, unfolds the delicate parchment, and begins to read.

The past and the present, finally converging.

The morning of the surprise arrives, and I can barely sit still. The town square is decorated, the stage is set, and the moment Becky walks into the square, it all comes together.

She stops dead in her tracks.

“What...?” she breathes, eyes wide as she takes everything in. The town has gathered—everyone from the bakery, the fire station, the ranch. The square is bursting with flowers, each shop owner having contributed a bouquet.

Maggie Ann walks forward, a bright smile on her face. “Welcome to Becky’s Blooming Festival!”

Becky’s hands fly to her mouth as she turns to me, completely stunned. “Mike... you did this?”

I step forward, my heart pounding. “We all did. You mean so much to this town, Becky. You’ve given so much, and we wanted to give something back to you.”

Tears well in her eyes, but she doesn’t speak.

So I do.

“Thank you, Becky.”

A hush falls over the crowd, but all I see is her.

Her lips part, and for a moment, she looks completely overwhelmed. Then, finally, she whispers, “Thank you, Mike.”

The applause is deafening, but all I feel is her arms wrapping around me.

It’s everything.

Chapter fifteen

Becky

I never expected my life to change so much in such a short time.

A few months ago, I was just a florist trying to rebuild my shop, convincing myself I was safe from my past. Now, I’m sitting on the wraparound porch of Thorn Ranch, staring at the last letter my grandmother wrote to me, knowing my entire world has shifted.

Page 29

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

The festival was a success, and the proceeds were incredible. But it's not just about the shop.

It's Mike.

Turning my head slightly, I watch him out of the corner of my eye. He's leaning against the railing, arms crossed, gazing out at the pasture with a thoughtful look.

The sunlight hits his profile just right, softening his rugged features. He's quiet, but his presence is as steady as ever—like a rock I didn't realize I needed to lean on.

Something deep inside me clicks into place—a feeling I've been dancing around for too long.

I can't imagine my life without him.

The realization is so clear, so overwhelming, that my breath catches in my throat.

I love Mike Thorn. Not just in the way that makes my heart race when he looks at me, but in the way that makes me feel safe, understood, and truly at home.

I fold the letter carefully, placing it back in the wooden box. The words my grandmother wrote still echo in my mind:

"Love does not wait for the perfect moment, Becky. It blooms when it's ready—whether you're prepared or not. Trust your heart."

My pulse pounds in my ears as I turn toward Mike. I need to tell him. I need him to know.

But before I can say a word, his phone buzzes in his pocket.

He checks the screen, frowns, then looks at me. “I’ll be right back,” he murmurs, brushing his fingers over mine before stepping off the porch.

The moment passes. But my feelings don’t.

The rest of the evening goes smoothly, and I drive myself home in a cozy mood.

The next morning, I wake up to a note slipped under my apartment door. I’m surprised and a little taken aback. He must have left it early this morning because I didn’t hear a thing.

Becky, Meet me at the ranch stables after sunset. Wear something nice. —Mike

My heart flutters as I trace the handwriting with my fingers. Something nice? That could mean anything. But the thought of Mike planning something special just for me fills me with nervous excitement. I’d be up for a romantic rendezvous.

I spend the day working in the shop, but my mind keeps drifting to whatever he’s planning. When the sun finally dips below the horizon, I slip into a simple, flowy floral dress—something easy and comfortable—and make my way to the stables.

When I step inside, I gasp.

The normally practical barn has been transformed. Twinkling fairy lights are strung

between the wooden beams, casting a warm glow over the space. A small table for two is set up in the center, a flickering candle illuminating a bouquet of fresh flowers—peonies, one of my favorites.

Mike is standing near a sleek black horse, dressed in his best button-down and jeans, looking more handsome than I've ever seen him. He smiles—that slow, confident grin that makes my stomach flip.

“Hope you’re not afraid of a sunset ride,” he says.

I press a hand to my chest, my heart melting. “Mike, this is... incredible.”

He steps closer, gently tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “I wanted to do something special,” he murmurs. “Something just for us.”

Tears prick my eyes. No one has ever made me feel this cherished, this seen.

I reach for his hand, squeezing it. “You didn’t have to go through all this trouble.”

His eyes darken with something deeper, something more intentional. “You’re worth it, Becky.”

The words hit me like wildfire.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

I am worth it.

We're about to mount the horses when my phone buzzes in my bag. I almost ignore it, lost in the moment, but something about it makes my stomach twist.

Unknown Number.

I frown and answer. "Hello?"

Silence.

Then, a familiar voice.

Paul.

"Becky," he says smoothly, like he has any right to say my name.

A cold chill runs down my spine.

Mike notices the change in my posture immediately. His jaw clenches, his hand resting protectively on my back. "Who is it?"

I can't even process the question because Paul keeps talking.

"I know we didn't end things the way we should have," he continues, his voice falsely gentle. "I've had time to think, and I don't like how we left things."

I grip the phone tighter. “You threw a brick through my window, Paul. That’s how we left things.”

He exhales sharply. “I didn’t mean for it to scare you. I was... emotional.”

“That’s not an excuse,” I scoff.

“Listen, Becky,” he says, his voice lowering. “I just want to talk. Just you and me. One conversation. I think we owe each other that.”

I feel Mike stiffen beside me, and before I can respond, he reaches for the phone. I let him take it.

“Listen to me, Paul,” Mike says, his voice low and dangerous. “You don’t owe Becky anything, and she sure as hell doesn’t owe you. Stay away from her.”

I hear Paul’s sharp intake of breath. “Wow. So you’re the one calling the shots now?”

“You had your chance,” Mike says, his grip tightening on the phone. “And you blew it.”

There’s a long, tense pause, and then Paul’s voice drops, laced with quiet anger.

“This isn’t over.”

The line goes dead.

My breath shudders out of me. I hadn’t realized I was shaking until Mike wraps his arm around me, pulling me close.

“He wasn’t like that when we were together,” I tell him. “I tried my best with him,

but he got in with the wrong people and developed a gambling problem. Who knows what else... and I had to leave him for my own good.”

“Yeah, things like that can change a person,” he says soothingly. “But he’ll have to work out his demons without you.”

“He’s not going to stop,” I whisper, feeling the weight of Paul’s obsession pressing down on me.

Mike tilts my chin up so I have to look at him. His eyes burn with determination. “Yes, he will,” he promises. “Because I won’t let him hurt you.”

I close my eyes, pressing my forehead against his chest, feeling safe and terrified all at once.

I know Mike will protect me.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

But deep down, I have a terrible feeling.

Paul isn't done yet.

Chapter sixteen

Mike

I don't make threats. I don't play games.

But when it comes to Becky, I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.

Paul's words—this isn't over—have been rattling in my brain all night, gnawing at the edges of my patience. I know his type. Men who can't take no for an answer. Men who believe they own something just because they once had it.

He doesn't own Becky. He never did.

And it's time he understands that.

I find Paul at Murphy's Garage, the only auto shop in town. His car is parked out front, hood up, grease stains smeared across the fender. He's leaning against the doorway, scrolling through his phone like he doesn't have a care in the world.

The sight of him makes my blood run hot.

I pull my truck in, cut the engine, and step out. He doesn't even look up until I'm

standing a few feet away.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Perfect Cowboy himself,” Paul drawls, shoving his phone into his pocket. His smirk is smug, like he thinks I’m here to trade insults.

I’m not.

I take a slow step closer, my voice low and steady. “We need to talk.”

Paul snorts. “What, no good morning? No handshake? You small-town types are losing your manners.”

I don’t rise to his bait. I just cross my arms, keeping my stance firm. “I’m only gonna say this once, Paul. You’re done. Stay away from Becky. No more calls. No more messages. No more showing up.”

Paul raises an eyebrow like he’s amused. “And if I don’t?”

A muscle in my jaw ticks. “Then you’ll be dealing with me.”

His smirk falters slightly, but he recovers fast. “You think you’re some kind of hero, don’t you? Riding in to save the helpless florist?”

I step even closer, lowering my voice to something dangerous, final. “Becky isn’t helpless. But she doesn’t need to waste another second worrying about you.”

Paul clenches his jaw, shoving off the doorframe. “She was mine first,” he mutters, voice tight. “You don’t just erase that.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I say, my tone deadly calm. “You lost her the second you made her afraid of you.”

His nostrils flare. “You think you’re better than me?”

“Yes.”

The word is simple, but it hits him hard.

He exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. He’s unraveling, and he knows it. “She loved me once,” he says, almost like he’s trying to convince himself.

I shake my head. “No, Paul. She loved who she thought you were. But she’s not looking back anymore.”

For the first time, I see something in his face that looks like real defeat. Like he finally understands that he’s lost.

He looks away, jaw tightening. “Whatever,” he mutters. “You two deserve each other.”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

I won't waste another second on him. I turn and walk away, leaving him standing there, alone with his regrets.

By the time I get back to the ranch, my mind is already working on what comes next.

Because Becky deserves more than just safety.

She deserves happiness, certainty, and a love that is as solid as the ground beneath her feet.

And I intend to give her all of it.

I call Lulu first. Getting my sister's advice and help on this topic seems crucial.

"I need your help," I say the second she picks up.

She gasps. "Oh my gosh, are you proposing to her? Tell me you're proposing!"

"I haven't even told you what I need yet," I chuckle.

"You don't have to! I knew this was coming."

I shake my head, grinning. "I want it to be big. Something that shows Becky how much she means to this town."

"Oh, you just wait," Lulu says, excitement bubbling in her voice. "We're making this perfect."

The next few hours are a chaos of secret phone calls, whispered plans, and a town-wide effort to pull this off.

By the end of the day, the whole town is buzzing with excitement, ready for what's coming.

The only person left in the dark?

Becky.

That night, I sit on the back porch of the ranch, admiring the sky, a deep shade of navy with stars blinking above.

Tomorrow, everything changes.

I pull the small velvet box from my pocket, flipping it open to reveal the delicate engagement ring inside. A simple, elegant gold band with a small sapphire stone, one that reminds me of the color of Becky's eyes when she's happy.

Tomorrow, I tell her everything.

Tomorrow, I ask Becky to be my forever.

Chapter seventeen

Becky

The town's energy is electric, the kind that settles deep in your chest and makes your heart beat just a little faster. Banners stretch across Main Street, bright floral arrangements line every storefront, and the town square is filled with people, their voices blending into a warm hum of excitement.

It's a day of celebration—a community event meant to bring people together, a way to show gratitude for the town's support after the recent fires and hardships.

But as I stand here, feeling the weight of the moment press against my ribs, I know there's something else happening today.

Something bigger.

Something involving Mike.

I've felt it brewing—the way he's been looking at me, the secretive smiles exchanged between Lulu, Maggie Ann, and Ellie, the way people keep glancing my way like they know something I don't.

And yet, I don't know if I'm ready. I'm a whirlwind of emotions, doubts, and fears.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

The Junction Falls Town Square is the heart of the town, a charming and picturesque gathering place that has stood for generations. Surrounded by historic brick buildings, locally owned shops, and tree-lined sidewalks, it's where the community comes together for celebrations, markets, and quiet afternoon strolls.

At its center stands the gazebo, an elegant wooden structure with a classic Victorian design. It's a beautiful white-painted wooden pavilion with its arched entryways adorned with delicate scrollwork. The roof is topped with a small copper finial, now aged to a soft patina, adding a timeless charm to the structure.

Surrounding the gazebo, the town square is a bustling yet cozy space, designed with cobblestone walkways and lush garden beds brimming with colorful seasonal flowers. Oak and maple trees, planted decades ago, provide shade during the warm months and turn into a brilliant display of red and gold in autumn.

Climbing roses and twining ivy weave around the supporting beams, their fragrant blossoms spilling over the edges, framing the open-air space in natural beauty.

I weave through the crowd, smiling as people greet me with warm hugs and kind words about the shop reopening. Maggie Ann hands me a fresh-baked croissant from her café, Ellie squeezes my hand and winks knowingly, and Burt, Mike's firefighter friend, tips his hat before disappearing into the crowd.

"Look at you," Lulu teases as she appears at my side, linking her arm through mine. "All sunshine and nerves."

I huff out a laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

She grins. “To me? Always.”

I chew my lip, glancing around. “Lulu... what’s happening today?”

She gives me a mischievous look. “You’ll see.”

Before I can press her for answers, the town’s mayor steps onto the gazebo stage, tapping the microphone with a loud, echoing thump.

A low wooden railing with hand-carved floral details encircles the gazebo, offering a place for people to lean against as they listen to speeches, watch performances, or simply take in the atmosphere. At the center, a small platform elevates speakers just enough to be visible to the entire crowd, making it the natural focal point for town events.

The atmosphere is alive with warmth and connection, a place where everyone knows each other’s names, where small moments become lifelong memories. Tonight, the square is full of people, their anticipation palpable in the air, waiting for a declaration of love they will talk about for years to come.

And at its center, beneath the glow of twinkling lights and the soft hum of the town’s heart, Mike stands in the gazebo, waiting to say something.

“Alright, everyone! Settle down now,” he calls, his booming voice easily cutting through the chatter. “We’ve got a special part of today’s celebration, and I want you all to turn your attention to a man who needs no introduction—our very own, Mike Thorn.”

A wave of applause erupts as Mike steps onto the stage, his broad shoulders squared, his usual gruff expression softened into something more open, more vulnerable. He looks steady, strong, but there’s something nervous in the way he runs a hand over

his jaw before he speaks.

My heart thuds painfully against my ribs.

“Hey, everyone,” Mike starts, his voice deeper than usual, a touch uncertain. He clears his throat, glancing at the crowd, then at me. “Most of you know I’m not one for speeches. I’d rather be out fixing fences, running the ranch, or putting out fires than standing up here talking about feelings.”

A ripple of laughter spreads through the crowd, but Mike doesn’t waver. He keeps his eyes locked on me, his expression serious and intent.

“But some things,” he continues, voice rough with emotion, “are worth saying out loud. And Becky, this one’s for you.”

The world tilts slightly as every pair of eyes turns in my direction. My throat tightens.

Mike exhales and pulls a small, folded piece of paper from his pocket.

“When Becky’s shop was being rebuilt, we found something in the walls. Something left behind—something meant for her to find.” His gaze holds mine, unwavering, steady. “A box, filled with letters from her grandmother. And in one of them, her grandmother wrote something that stuck with me.”

He unfolds the paper, his voice soft but carrying across the square.

"Love does not wait for the perfect moment, Becky. It blooms when it's ready—whether you're prepared or not. Trust your heart."

A lump rises in my throat.

Mike looks up from the paper, and for a second, it's like there's no one else here.

"I love you, Becky," he says, his voice raw and real. "I didn't expect it. I didn't plan for it. But it happened, and now, I can't picture a single day without you."

I suck in a sharp breath, tears pricking my eyes.

"This town has always been my home," he continues, stepping down from the stage, moving closer, "but you? You've made it feel whole."

Page 34

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

The crowd is silent, completely still, as Mike drops to one knee, reaching into his pocket.

And when he pulls out a small velvet box, the air rushes out of my lungs.

“I don’t want to wait anymore,” he says. “I don’t want to waste another second not knowing what comes next.” He opens the box, revealing a delicate gold ring with a small sapphire stone, the exact color of my eyes.

The crowd collectively gasps.

“Becky,” Mike says, his voice firm but full of so much tenderness it almost breaks me, “will you marry me?”

The entire town holds its breath, waiting.

And suddenly... I can’t breathe.

I feel every emotion all at once—love, fear, hope, doubt. It’s too much, too fast, too real.

I stare at the ring, at Mike, at the faces watching, and for the first time in my life, I don’t know what to say. The silence says something.

The crowd waits.

Mike waits.

And I?

I say nothing.

Chapter eighteen

Mike

The world is silent.

I'm still on one knee, the ring glinting in the golden light of the town square. The crowd is waiting, holding their breath, the hush stretching long and thin between Becky and me.

She hasn't answered.

My heart pounds, the weight of everything settling deep in my chest. I meant every word I said. I would give her my whole world, this town, a lifetime of safety and love. But I can see the whirlwind of emotions in her eyes—love, fear, disbelief.

She's afraid.

I tighten my grip on the small velvet box, willing myself to be patient, to let her come to me in her own time.

The town square feels frozen in time, lit by twinkling lights and the glow of the setting sun. Flower beds overflowing with roses, tulips, and marigolds add bright bursts of color against the quaint storefronts that line the square, each shop painted in warm, inviting tones with hanging flower baskets by their doors. Everything is quiet, waiting in anticipation.

My sister, Lulu, is in the front row of the crowd, clutching Maggie Ann's hand, her eyes wide with excitement. Ellie is next to them, nodding like she knew this was coming all along.

I see it, the quiet support, the unspoken encouragement from the people Becky loves.

I don't care that everyone is watching. All that matters is her. Actually, I want to profess my love for her from the mountaintop.

Finally, she takes a deep breath.

And everything changes.

Tears spill down her cheeks, and for a second, I think my heart might shatter right here in this gazebo. But then, she nods—just barely—before whispering the word that turns my whole world inside out.

“Yes.”

The single word that Becky answers rings in my ears, reverberating in my soul.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

Then she laughs—a breathless, almost disbelieving sound, as if the decision just knocked the wind out of her. “Yes, Mike. I’ll marry you.”

The crowd erupts into cheers, claps, and whistles, the entire town coming alive around us.

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding, standing and slipping the ring onto her finger, watching as it catches the glow of the lanterns overhead.

She looks down at it, swiping at her tears with the back of her hand, her face lighting up in a way that sears itself into my memory.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she murmurs, almost to herself.

I cup her cheek, forcing her to look at me, to really see me. “Believe it,” I say, my voice gravelly with emotion. “Because I’m never letting you go.”

She lets out a shaky laugh before throwing her arms around my neck, burying her face in my shoulder.

And then I exhale, knowing she’s mine.

The moment I pull away, Becky is immediately surrounded. Lulu practically tackles her in a hug, Maggie Ann wipes her own tears away before pulling her in, and Ellie beams like she’s already planning the wedding. The town loves her.

Even the mayor claps me on the shoulder with a booming, “You did good, son.” I

glance around, taking it all in.

This town—my town—has become ours, too.

And that? That's something I didn't even know I wanted until now.

She belongs here.

With me.

With us.

When the celebration dies down and the crowd disperses, I take Becky's hand and lead her toward the flower shop, our steps slow and easy.

She's been hugged within an inch of her life by nearly everyone in town. I gently tug her toward me.

"You wanna get out of here for a bit?" I murmur.

She nods with a sense of relief. We need some quiet and some time to let this moment sink in before the reality of wedding planning and congratulations fully sets in.

We weave through the town square, hand in hand, the fairy lights strung above casting everything in a golden glow. Couples chat near the gazebo, families laugh near the fountain, and kids chase each other.

Junction Falls has always felt magical at night, but tonight? It feels like a dream.

Halfway down the street, we pass by Giovanni's Gelato Cart, the small vendor stand run by old Mr. Giovanni, who moved here from Italy years ago and never left. His

hand-painted wooden cart, parked at its usual spot near the café, is stacked with rows of colorful gelato tubs, the scent of fresh waffle cones drifting into the air.

I stop in my tracks. “I think this calls for a celebration.”

She laughs. “We just had a whole town square cheering for us, and you think gelato is the real celebration?”

“Sweetheart,” I grin, “every big moment in life should involve dessert.”

Rolling her big eyes, she lets me pull her toward the cart, where Mr. Giovanni greets us with a wide, knowing smile.

“Ahh, amore,” he says in his thick accent, clapping his hands together. “I heard the news! Magnifico!”

She flushes as I laugh. “Guess word travels fast.”

“In a town like this? Of course.” Mr. Giovanni winks, then gestures toward the array of flavors. “Tonight, for the happy couple, my treat.”

Letting her choose first, I watch as she scans the tubs—lavender honey, dark chocolate, fresh peach, salted caramel. They all look incredible. Her gaze lands on one in particular.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

“I’ll have the strawberry basil,” Becky says excitedly. “I remember how my grandmother used to make strawberry jam with fresh basil in the summer.”

Raising an eyebrow, I don’t comment. Instead, I turn to Mr. Giovanni. “I’ll take two scoops of the espresso.”

We take our cones and continue our walk down the quiet streets, the familiar warmth of Junction Falls wrapping around us. Shops have dimmed their lights for the night, but the window displays still glow softly.

“Are you happy?” I ask.

Her expression softens, her eyes searching mine, and then she exhales slowly, her lips curling into a smile that feels like home.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy,” she whispers.

I wrap my arms around her, holding her against me, letting the night settle around us like a promise.

Because I know now, without a doubt—we were always meant to end up here.

EPILOGUE:Becky

The scent of fresh roses and lavender drifts through my florist shop as I finish tying the last ribbon around a bouquet for a wedding order.

Soft light filters through the front windows, illuminating the shop with a warm glow, making the colorful flowers seem even more vibrant.

Glancing around at my bustling store, my dream finally realized, I smile. Everything feels right.

It's been six months since Mike's proposal, and our lives have fallen into an easy, wonderful rhythm. The shop is thriving, the town has rallied around us in support, and Mike and I... well, we're as in love as ever.

Maybe even more.

The bell over the door chimes, and I look up, expecting a customer. Instead, Mike strides in, looking every bit the rugged rancher, his strong frame filling the space as he grins at me.

"Hey, sweetheart," he says, leaning against the counter, arms crossed in that casual way that makes my heart flip every single time.

I raise a brow. "Aren't you supposed to be checking the fences today?"

He shrugs. "Delegated."

"Thank goodness for Pete," I say, rolling my eyes. I laugh. "You just wanted an excuse to come see me."

"Guilty," he admits, reaching over to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. His touch sends warmth spiraling down my spine, just like it always does.

B., the kitten, now much bigger but still just as mischievous, jumps up onto the counter and rubs against Mike's hand. He gives her a few scratches behind the ears

before nodding toward the back of the shop.

“I’ve got something for you,” he says.

“Oh?” I tilt my head, intrigued.

He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “Come outside.”

I follow him through the shop, past the floral arrangements, the twinkling fairy lights, and the shelves of potted herbs, stepping into the small back garden where we keep the greenhouse.

And there, standing in the middle of it all, is a new wooden sign, freshly carved and mounted on the fence.

Flourish Floral: Proud Supporter of the Junction Falls Animal Shelter

I cover my mouth, emotion tightening my throat. “Mike...”

He slides his hands into his pockets, looking just a little too pleased with himself. “Thought it was about time we made it official. A portion of the shop’s sales will go toward the shelter, helping them with supplies and medical costs.”

I turn to him, love swelling so big in my chest I feel like I might burst. “You did this for me?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:31 am

He shakes his head. “No. I did it for us.”

As we head back inside the shop, Mike leans against the counter and grins like he’s got something else up his sleeve.

I narrow my eyes. “What?”

“Oh, just thinking,” he says. “Now that I’ve got my happily-ever-after, might be time to help a few others find theirs.”

I stare at him. “You? The guy who used to say romance was a distraction?”

“Times change,” he smirks.

I cross my arms. “Who exactly do you think needs matchmaking?”

Mike straightens. “Nathan, for one. That guy spends too much time working. He needs someone to shake things up.”

I snort. “Nathan has a cat. He’s fine.”

“And Pete,” Mike continues, undeterred. “He’s been single too long.”

“Oh my word,” I burst into laughter, shaking my head. “You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna rope Ellie into helping me out with this side project.” Mike wraps

an arm around my waist, pulling me close, his voice low in my ear. “What can I say? Being in love is pretty great.”

My laughter fades into something softer, warmer, as I look up at him. “Yeah. It really is.”

That evening, I curl up in our cozy living room, flipping through the box of my grandmother’s letters. The fireplace crackles softly, casting flickering shadows across the walls.

Mike sits beside me, his arm draped around my shoulders, B. curled up in his lap. I pull out one last letter, one I must’ve missed before.

My dearest Becky,

"Love is not about perfection. It’s about choosing each other every single day, even when things aren’t easy. It’s about finding someone who makes you feel at home, no matter where you are. Trust in that, and love will always find its way back to you."

I close my eyes, letting the words settle deep inside me.

Mike presses a kiss to my temple, his voice soft. “What did it say?”

I smile, resting my head against his shoulder. “That I found exactly what I was meant to.”

He squeezes my hand, and for the first time in my life, I don’t feel uncertain about what comes next.

Because this—this love, this life, this town—is exactly where I belong.

THE END